SEPTEMBER – NOVEMBER 2022
ISSUE 010
AUS/NZ

Rolling Stone

Climate Of Fear
How Inaction is Taking a Toll

NZ's Future Hitmakers

Time's Up
Women of '90s Rock Speak Out

The Wiggles

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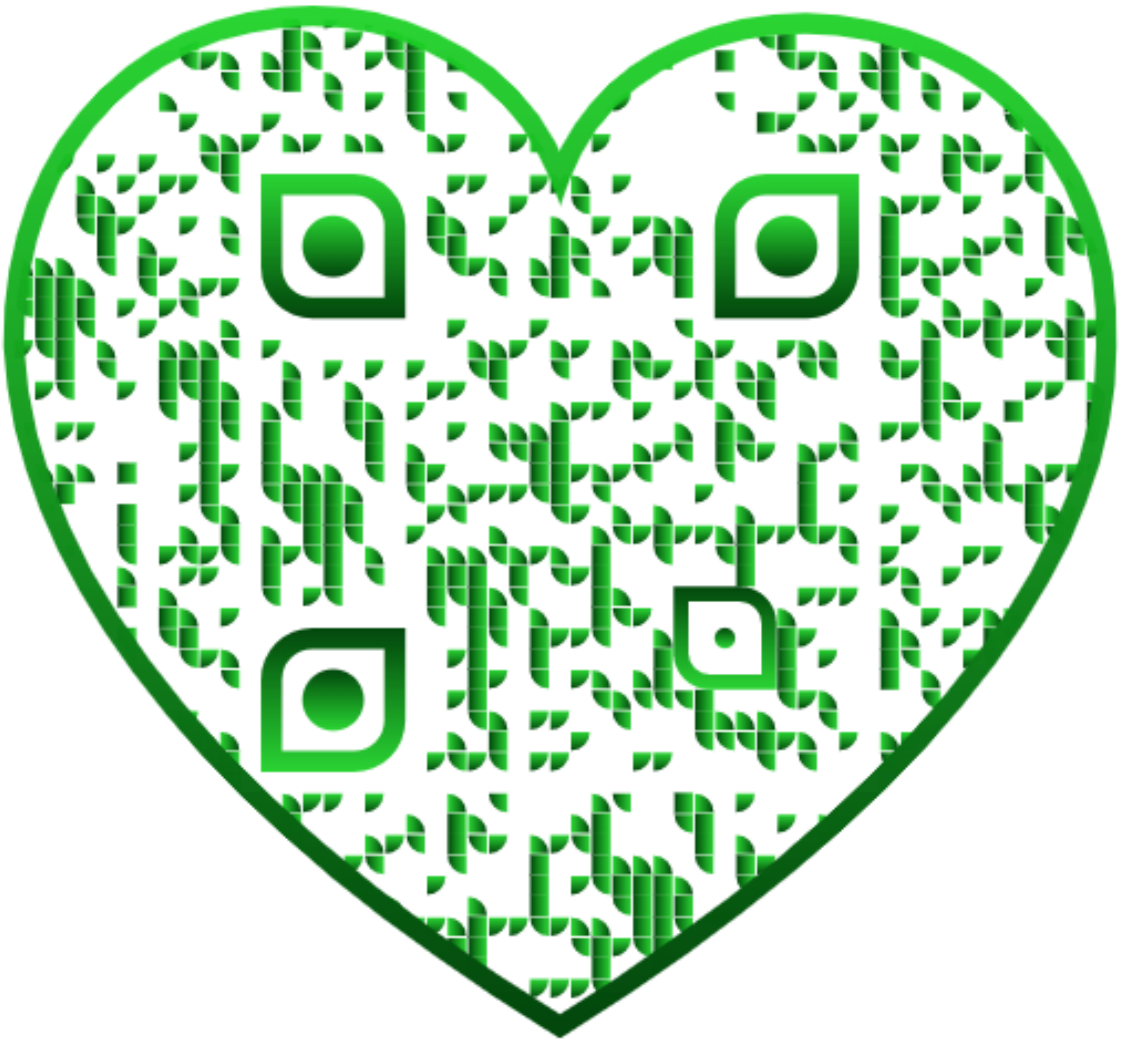

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Ben Lee
The Titular Troublemaker

After thirty years, self-described troublemaker Ben Lee is releasing one of the best albums of his career, and having the time of his life in the process.
By Tyler Jenke

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PANHEAD 2022 Rolling Stone NEW ZEALAND ★AWARDS★

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Harvest Rock

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ADELAIDE SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Secret Sounds

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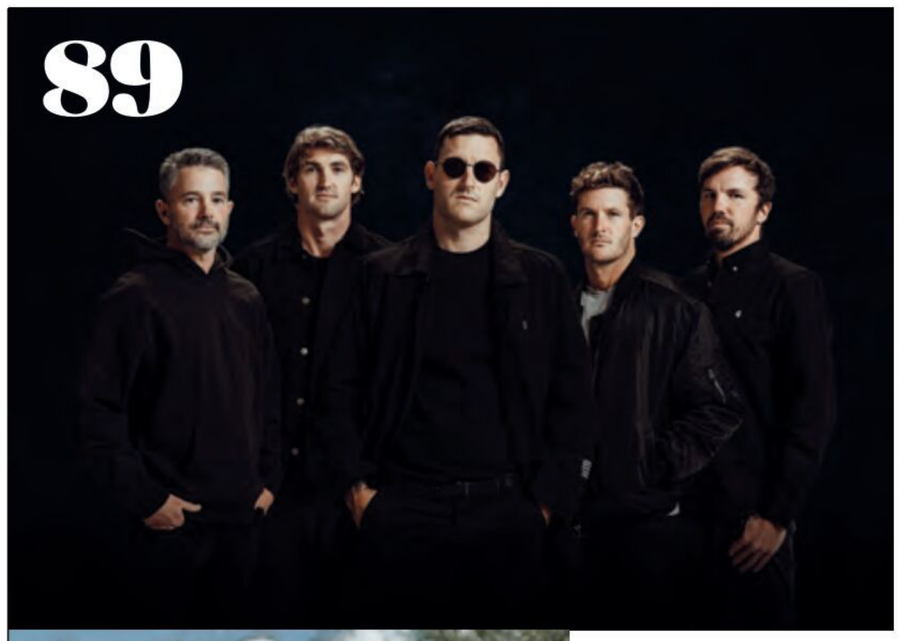

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On the Cover

The Wiggles, photographed on May 27, 2022 at Hot Potato Studios in Sydney by **Giulia Giannini McGauran**

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Hair and Makeup:	**Lei Tai**
Production:	**Long Story Short**
Photography Assistant:	**Izaac Margin**
Styling Assistant:	**Kirsten Humphreys**

PAIGE: SUPPLIED. PARKWAY DRIVE: DAVE LE PAGE. STAN WALKER: RAWHAI WETERE

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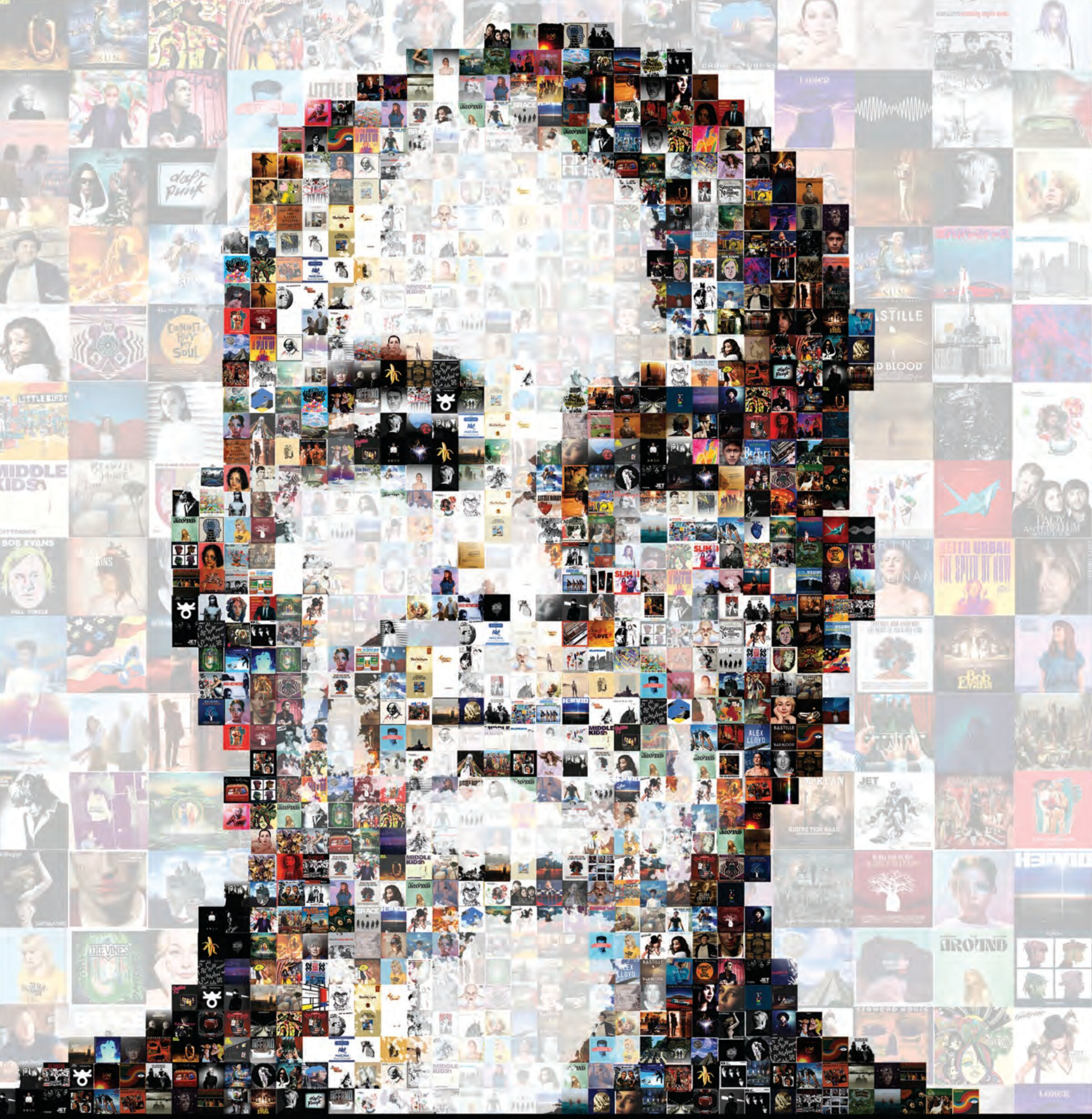

MUSIC MAN. MENTOR. FRIEND. RACONTEUR. LEADER. PUN-LOVER. FAN.

THANK YOU JOHN O'DONNELL

EMI

CONGRATULATIONS ON A WILD RIDE SPANNING TWO DECADES AT THE HELM

Editor's Letter

The Wacky Worlds Around Us

WHEN ROLLING STONE announced The Wiggles as our cover stars back in July, nothing could have prepared us for the response we got.

The cover made global headlines, was featured on prime time news shows, was relentlessly debated in social media comments, and was added to pub trivia question lists.

Personally, I found the response validating. As Editor in Chief, the task of anointing a career with a *Rolling Stone* cover is not taken lightly, and we can never predict the reaction of you, our valued reader. Some of you are probably wondering what we're up to by putting a children's musical group on the cover. I can picture it now: an avid *Rolling Stone* reader sits by their record player, the skinny pipes of some of the most hallowed musical works stacked in perfect order on a shelf... and they're thinking, 'What in the hot potato is this?'

I'll let you in on a little secret. We often don't decide on a cover star until after all the interviews are done and dusted – sometimes there are multiple people we desperately want to put on the cover, but for us, it's all about the strength of the interview.

With The Wiggles, our Print Editor Jake Challenor was given unprecedented access to the band and the team around them. I fondly remember the calls from Jake after each subsequent interview – another trip down the rabbit hole into The Wiggles' wacky world. "Guess what?" and "No way!" formed the foundation of our conversations. After thirty-one years as one of the most commercially successful musical groups to take the Australian flag across the globe, I thought their story was widely known and heavily documented. But as Jake relaid the quirks and quotes he'd been privy to, I realised this story, his story, had never been told before.

> Some of you are probably wondering what we're up to by putting a children's musical group on the cover.

We hope we do you proud with this magazine. Not only does it invite you into the world of The Wiggles, it traverses a few other wacky worlds too. Whether it's the four-day 'comedy of errors' conference that led to our piece on the oil and gas industry, or self-described troublemaker Ben Lee on the journey that led to his twentieth album – or the niche influencers whose eccentricity is thriving in the face of 'norm' culture – this issue is as varied as it is curious.

Additionally, you'll find a few tips of the hat to the New Zealand music industry in this issue. From the Kiwi artists we think are worth your undivided attention, to our feature piece on one of Aotearoa's most prized new music exports, Teeks; to the nominees we celebrated at the inaugural Rolling Stone New Zealand Awards on August 31, we hope this magazine piques your curiosity in the same way it has ours.

POPPY REID
EDITOR IN CHIEF

ON THE COVER

THE WIGGLES FOR ROLLING STONE

PHOTOGRAPHER:	GIULIA GIANNINI McGAURAN
STYLIST:	JANA BARTOLO
HAIR AND MAKEUP:	LEI TAI
PRODUCTION:	LONG STORY SHORT
PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT:	IZAAC MARGIN
STYLING ASSISTANT:	KIRSTEN HUMPHREYS

GOT A HOT NEWS TIP?

WE WANT TO HEAR IT.

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2022 ROLLING STONE NEW ZEALAND AWARDS

PANHEAD 2022 RollingStone NEW ZEALAND ★AWARDS★

The inaugural Panhead Rolling Stone New Zealand Awards took place on August 31, paying tribute to the best and brightest in Aotearoa's music scene.

BENEE: ADAM BRYCE, STAN WALKER: RAWHAI WETERE, LORDE: SUPPLIED, MITCH JAMES: SUPPLIED

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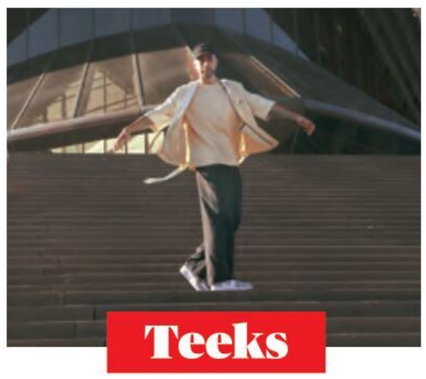
Best New Artist

Nominees

Goodwill

CHAII



Teeks

TE KAAHU

There's a Tuesday

Muroki

Rory Noble

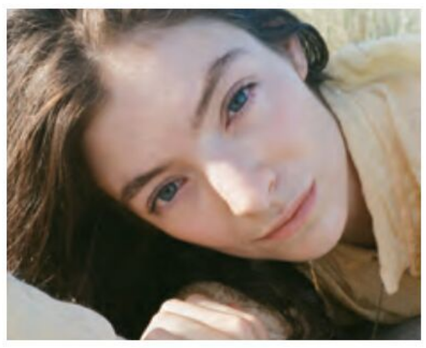
Reuben Fleetwood

Best Single

Nominees

Gin Wigmore
"Hand Over Heart"

Teeks
"Younger"



Lorde
"Solar Power"

Six60
"Pepeha"

Rob Ruha & Ka Hao
"35"

lilbubblegum
"billie eilish"

BROODS ft. Tove Lo
"I Keep"

Mitch James
"Be Somebody"

GOODWILL: SUPPLIED, CHAII: EVAN XIAO, TEEKS: SUPPLIED, TE KAAHU: FRANCIS CARTER, THERE'S A TUESDAY: TOMFISHER, MUROKI: JARED TINETTI, RORY NOBLE: CONNOR PRITCHARD, REUBEN FLEETWOOD: PETER FURLONG, GIN WIGMORE: SUPPLIED, TEEKS: SUPPLIED, LORDE: OPHELIA MIKKELSON, SIX60: SUPPLIED, ROB RUHA: ERICA SINCLAIR, LILBUBBLEGUM: SUPPLIED, BROODS: SUPPLIED, MITCH JAMES: SUPPLIED

Best Record

Nominees

Stan Walker
Te Arohanui

BENEE
Lychee

Ladyhawke
Time Flies

Yumi Zouma
Present Tense

L.A.B
L.A.B V

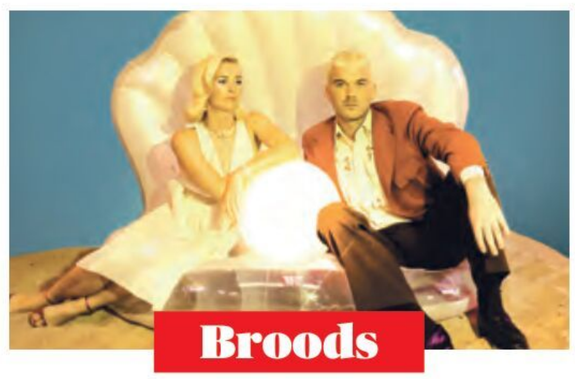
Reb Fountain
IRIS

Aldous Harding
Warm Chris

Crowded House
Dreamers Are Waiting

Rolling Stone Global Award

Nominees



STAN WALKER: RAWHAI WETERE. BENEE: ADAM BRYCE. LADYHAWKE: LULA CUCCHIARA. YUMI ZOUMA: SUPPLIED. L.A.B: MEEK ZUIDERWYK. REB FOUNDTAIN: MARISSA FINDLAY. ALDOUS HARDING: EMMA WALLBANKS. CROWDED HOUSE: SUPPLIED. LORDE: OPHELIA MIKKELSON. BENEE: LULA CUCCHIARA. SIX60: SUPPLIED. L.A.B: SARAH HUNTER. CROWDED HOUSE: SUPPLIED. BROODS: DANA TRIPPE

Willie Nelson

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★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Opening Act

Isabella Manfredi:
Calling The Shots

ISABELLA MANFREDI is finally in charge and she's loving it.

Calling the shots has opened up a new sense of autonomy, artistry and authenticity for the former frontwoman of The Preatures.

And while her status may have changed, her intentions and ideals have not.

Manfredi wants her songs to be joyful and inclusive. She wants people to wrap themselves up in her music and feel transcendent.

Her artistic intentions aren't complicated, she says, and they haven't been for quite some time.

"It's always been the same thing for me," she explains. "When I was in high school, I was doing my Year 12 major work for art, and I did this intricate city based on Utopia. It was all colourful and kaleidoscopic, a sort of technicolour world. And they asked me to do the artist statement. And my artist statement was 'I want people to see my work and feel happy and move on'. And they said, 'That's not an artist statement and you won't get good marks for that'."

Despite the 'feedback', the statement — as well as those kaleidoscopes of colour — remain her guiding light.

"I've always thought about my music as kaleidoscopic and there's this sort of technicolour wonderland to it. It's always seemed like it's branched off in all kinds of different directions, and I've never been able to quite bridle it."

Until now.

So what does a kaleidoscope of colour and sound and joy and inclusiveness and freedom actually sound like?

"I've always said that the directive for this record was Bruce Springsteen if he was in an all-girl group in the early 2000s," she says, citing an alternative universe we likely all want to visit.

"[This record] encompasses all the plethora of music that I loved when I was growing up. But I think what's unique about this record is that there's a return to storytelling for me, and that it's more personal and lyrical than Preatures ever was."

Words by: Vivienne Kelly

Picture This

PHOTOS

Australian and New Zealand artists are constantly turning heads; *Rolling Stone* is here to capture it all.

▼ MAY-A

MAY-A with her band at the Oxford Art Factory in Sydney in May.

L-R at the back: Chloe Dadd (guitarist), MAY-A, Caitlin McGregor (bass/keys), Giorgia Miedzinski (drums). At the front is Carla Wehbe who jumped on stage during "Swing of Things".

Photograph by Ruby Boland

▶ FLUME

Flume and Canibble hanging on set in Hobart while shooting the music video for "Highest Building" feat. Oklou.

Photograph by Kishka Jensen

▲ DRAX PROJECT

Drax Project on set after filming the live versions of their songs from the *Diamond* EP in Wellington, NZ.

L-R: Sam Thomson, Matt Beachen, Ben O'Leary, Shaan Singh.

▼ L.A.B

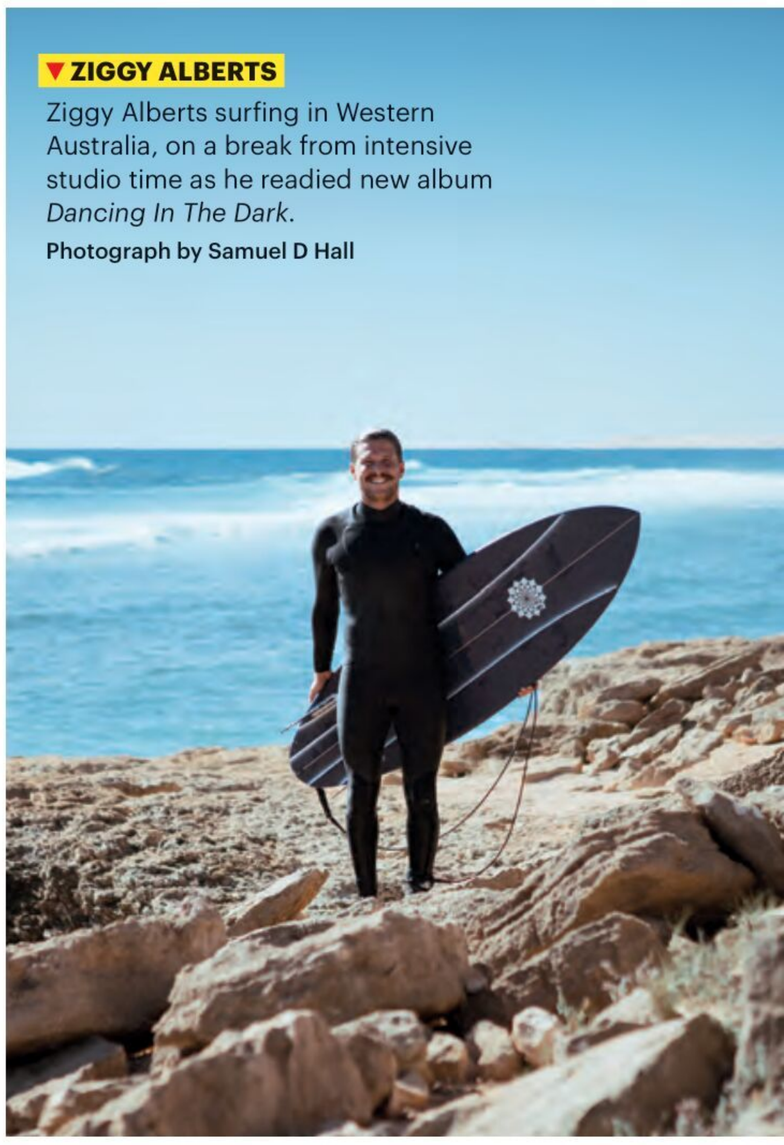
Kiwi reggae masters L.A.B backstage before their sold out Sydney concert at Big Top, Luna Park on April 9, 2022.

Photograph by Renae Saxby

◀ THE KID LAROI

The Kid LAROI offered a surprise pop-up for Australian fans at cult streetwear label StreetX in Perth.

Photograph by Adam Kargenian



▼ ZIGGY ALBERTS

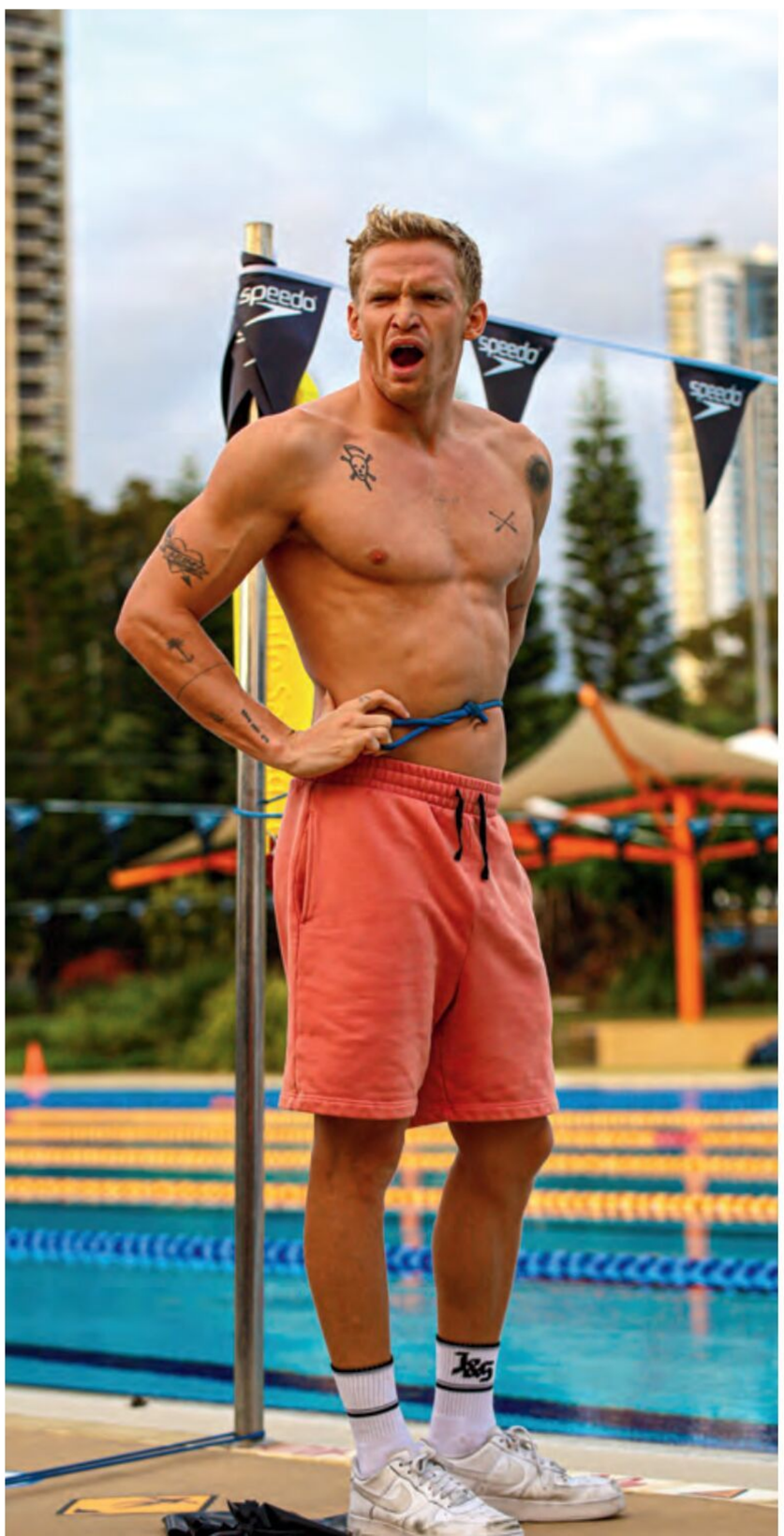
Ziggy Alberts surfing in Western Australia, on a break from intensive studio time as he readied new album *Dancing In The Dark*.

Photograph by Samuel D Hall

▲ SAMPA THE GREAT

Sampa The Great at her soundcheck at Primavera Festival, Barcelona, Catalonia.

L-R Mwanjè Tembo, Kasonde Sunkutu, Sampa Tembo, Jamie Carson and Tio Nason.



▼ TONES AND I

Tones And I between shows in Seattle hanging out with her friend and new "Chant" collaborator Macklemore.

Photograph by Nick Beeba

◀ CODY SIMPSON

Musician and swimming star Cody Simpson offers a pre-morning training yawn at Gold Coast Aquatic Centre in June.

Photograph by Barbara Vali

Aussie Punks Invade New York

SOME PUNK bands might have trouble translating their inherently scrappy art form from their natural club habitats to larger stages. But at their biggest headlining show to date — at New York's 1,800-cap Brooklyn Steel in May — Melbourne's Amyl and the Sniffers leveled up beautifully, suggesting a sweaty mashup of the Stones and the Stooges, with singer Amy Taylor flinging herself around the stage like a renegade aerobics instructor. "It's not always easy for an Australian pub band to come play overseas," Taylor says, "so what an honour to get the response of people wanting to come down and have a good feral time." **HANK SHTEAMER**

Amyl and the Sniffers' Amy Taylor and Fergus Romer at New York's Brooklyn Steel

SACHA LECCA

▶ (Blue Caddy)
Todd and Kym Wylie's
Necessary Evil

▶ Kendal and Dylan
Smith's **The Green Go**

▶ **Kustom King**
Neil Surtees in his
workshop

"THERE'S GOT TO BE SOME CULTURE BEHIND IT"

Panhead Custom Ales is Sharing Stories from the Kustom Kulture Community

By Augustus Welby

Craft brewery Panhead Custom Ales takes inspiration from New Zealand's kustom kulture community. The brand's Custom Can Range is accompanied by a film series that highlights many heroes of the scene.

Panhead's Custom Can Range is indebted to the creativity of New Zealand's kustom kulture community. The series of limited-run beers allows Panhead founder and Head Of Customisation Mike Neilson and the Panhead "Brew Crew" to let their imagination run wild. But the Custom Can Range is about more than whipping up fresh hop IPAs and vanilla milk stouts in Panhead's Upper Hutt HQ.

"It's about giving the people in the culture a platform to tell their stories," says Rebecca Sinclair, Head of Brand and Creative at Panhead.

The repertoire of short films created by kustom kulture content maker Cal Thorley is central to the project's storytelling agenda. Thorley has spent much of his professional life working in local television, but his most adored creation is the web series *Hot Rod Revue,* which he launched as a passion project roughly a decade ago.

"The chance to lift the lid and showcase the culture behind it, it's always something I'm going to be pretty excited to be involved with," Thorley says. "There's so many neat characters and stories involved."

The beers in Panhead's Custom Can Range are all inspired by a particular car, carmaker, racer or artist from within the kustom kulture community. There's Lucky 17, a dry hazy IPA based on Bob and Julie Neville's open-top race car of the same name, and The Ace, a salted margarita gose inspired by pinstriper and Rat Fink artist Stace the Ace.

The first Panhead brew to pay tribute to an icon of New Zealand kustom kulture was The Vandal, an award-winning NZ IPA, which, at 8% ABV, has taken on mythic status among craft beer drinkers on both sides of the Tasman. The original Vandal was a flake green 1919 Dodge Bucket owned by Tauranga local John Reid.

"Vandal came along because we were thinking of ways to express the culture within the industry that I'm a part of," says Neilson.

The Custom Can Range takes things one step further. It's not simply about decorating the cans with petrolhead insignia, but about sharing the stories of the passionate individuals who give life to the kustom kulture community.

"It was more interesting for us to tell the story of these guys who kind of were like us in the brewery, where they make these custom cars and express the way they feel by creating these vehicles — like we do with our beer," says Neilson.

Thorley is right at home interacting with the characters and two-, three- and four-wheeled machines in the kustom community. His films combine footage of hot rods, dragsters, lowriders, muscle cars and gassers with biographical storytelling.

"What we're ultimately looking for is just good stories from the various subcultures within the kustom kulture," Thorley says. "What I really love is that it's not like Panhead have got a beer in mind and I'm going to look for something that's going to fit in with that. It's the opposite — we're taking stories and letting that be the inspiration."

Thorley's films reveal that a passion for kustom kulture often runs in the family. The vanilla milk stout Necessary Evil gets its name from a '56 Cadillac Coupe owned by Todd, Kym and Kennedy Wylie. Green Go, a 7% fresh hop IPA, is based on the eponymous Californian dragster owned and preserved by father and son Kendal and Dylan Smith of Kruzin Kustoms in Palmerston North.

Neilson himself inherited a love of vintage American muscle cars from his father, Danny Neilson, who once worked at the Dunlop tyre factory that became Panhead's original headquarters. Without creative concepts such as the Custom Can Range, Neilson says his job wouldn't be nearly as fulfilling.

"It'd just be making beers for us, which is fine, but it's got to be bigger than that; there's got to be some sort of culture behind it," he says.

Among kustom kulture diehards, individuals like Aaron Carson, the customiser responsible for the Ford T hot rod, Tumblin' Dice, and Neil Surtees, the son of a boilermaker and a relentless custom car builder, have attained a kind of celebrity status. But in Thorley's experience, none of the hot rodders or lowrider enthusiasts he meets are motivated by a lust for accolades. Rather, they're driven by a genuine passion for customisation, which shines through in the custom can films.

> "As the series has gone on, people are genuinely really stoked to be recognised that way," Thorley says. "Any nerves... or if they're a quiet person, they quickly overcome that when they realise they're just talking about something they love. They quickly warm into it because it's something they live and breathe."

The next entry in the custom can series is Dust Up, named after the Jalopy Dust Up, which occurs annually at the Waihi Beach Dirt Track Club. "It's an amazing, old school speedway track, which overlooks Waihi Beach," says Thorley. "Once a year, the hot rods take it over and whip 'round and create a heck of a lot of dust."

Panhead's Dust Up is an IPA. Though it's a bit different to the new world IPAs that have become the brewery's specialty. "The recipe was formulated based on taking it back to the old world," says Neilson. "It's quite rich in malt and the hops are more traditional than the new haze craze. You get your earthy, piney, citrusy notes. It's paying homage to the old ways."

Kustom kulture is similarly rooted in paying homage to the old ways, but it's fuelled by a passion for customisation and self-expression. Just like Panhead.

▶ **Dust Up** IPA available now, NZ only

▲ **Panhead Crew** with Stace the Ace for the launch of her Custom Can 'The Ace'.

Marlin's Dreaming

Dunedin indie rockers Marlin's Dreaming are one sleep from stardom.

RS Recommends: "Trophies"

By **JAKE CHALLENOR** Photograph by **Grace Mirams**

RS RECOMMENDS

ARTISTS YOU NEED TO KNOW

9 NINE KIWI ARTISTS TIPPED TO TAKE OVER

Rory Noble

Rory Noble is out of the shadows after credits with Kanye West and Ruel.

RS Recommends: "What If I Can't (Ft. Mikey Dam)"

CONNOR PRITCHARD

Aotearoa music is having a moment. From popular playlists to famed festivals, Kiwi artists continue to break down barriers for the world to enjoy. *Rolling Stone* unearths nine more destined for a global chart attack.

The Butlers

Smooth and funky, The Butlers rock to the beat of their own drum.

RS Recommends: "It's Only A Day"

TOM FISHER

Paige

Turning heads for all the right reasons, Paige is rising to prominence.

RS Recommends: "Waves"

LUKE PENNEY

Muroki

From Kenya to the black beaches of Raglan, Muroki is making waves.

RS Recommends: "Surfin"

SARAH HALEEM

COTERIE

Life is on the up and up for NZ chart-toppers and Māori brothers, COTERIE.

RS Recommends: "Cooling It Down"

PJ HUNTER

JARED TINETTI

Kiki Rickwell

Frontwoman of Auckland band The Leers is masterminding the perfect storm.

RS Recommends: "Same Old Energy"

JARED TINETTI

MCK

MCK is rewriting pop music's age-old rulebook, one song at a time.

RS Recommends: "Paragraphs"

Rob Ruha

Rob Ruha sings of Indigenous truth with uplifting resolution and spirit.

RS Recommends: "That's Where I'll Be"

ERICA SINCLAIR

HAPPY

The *Titular* Troublemaker

Words By *Tyler Jenke*
Photography By *Byron Spencer*

AFTER THIRTY YEARS, SELF-DESCRIBED TROUBLEMAKER BEN LEE IS RELEASING ONE OF THE BEST ALBUMS OF HIS CAREER, AND HAVING THE TIME OF HIS LIFE IN THE PROCESS.

IT'S MORNING IN Melbourne when my phone alerts me to an incoming text message. It's Ben Lee, who, from his home in Los Angeles, is sharing the list of cameos set to feature in the "Parents Get High" film clip. The list – which boasts actor Paul Scheer, comedian Margaret Cho, and Savage Garden's Darren Hayes, to name a few – seems almost too eccentric for the video to be pulled off successfully.

"It seems like something that – on paper – shouldn't work, but I'm sure it will," I respond. Ben's reply is short and succinct, and arrives only moments later: "That's my whole career."

IT'S A LITTLE strange to imagine that at forty-three, Ben Lee has been a staple of the Australian music scene since his earliest teen years. In fact, as he and I connect over Zoom (though in LA, he's dressed in a merch shirt of Melbourne's Georgia Maq, of Camp Cope fame), we're speaking exactly thirty years to the day that Nirvana played the inaugural Big Day Out festival in Sydney. As any Aussie music historian will tell you, it was witnessing the Seattle grunge icons on that very day in 1992 that inspired Lee to form his first band, Noise Addict.

Thirty years later, Lee has had an incredible run. He's been mentored by and shared stages with iconic artists such as Sonic Youth and The Lemonheads, he was signed to the Beastie Boys' Grand Royal label, and by the time he was twenty-one, split with his first band and was already three solo albums deep into his illustrious – and prolific – career. However, Lee will be the first to tell you that, even as he gears up to release his twentieth album, the songwriting process still remains a mystery to him.

"Everyone's got theories on creativity and no one's figured it out. That's why computers can't do it yet," Lee says, referring to one of his learned neighbours. "She's convinced that the rate of development of creativity by technology means that inevitably technology will be able to be purely creative at some point. And I'm open to it, but I haven't seen it yet.

"It just seems like this big mystery that if I have a career of writing songs and I still don't understand it after 25-30 years, how is anyone going to program a computer to do it?"

Regardless of whether such technology is possible ("In order for technology to become creative, it will first actually have to learn how to suffer," he quips), Lee has managed to curate an enviable discography. As we speak, he's gearing up to release *I'm Fun!,* his first solo album of new material since 2015's *Freedom, Love and The Recuperation of the Human Mind*. Bolstered by lead single "Born For This Bullshit", it's a record that sees Lee embracing life, having fun, and ultimately, making some of the best music of his career.

"I guess I was forty-one, and I was reflecting on my career and what I'd achieved and all this kind of stuff, and I just realised that I didn't have a model in my mind of what this next chapter of my career would look like yet," he explains. "I didn't know why that was, but it struck me that I wasn't listening to music that was made by people who were my age."

Soon, Lee was taking to Twitter (he's become something of a social media aficionado these days), and asking his legions of followers about their favourite records made by artists after the age of forty. Results came in thick and fast, naming the likes of Tom Waits, Lucinda Williams, PJ Harvey, and more. Before long, Lee realised that these artists had created great bodies of work due to having lived full lives complete with victories, defeats, and humiliations.

It became clear that if he wasn't entering his forties thinking he was going to make the best music of his career, he was doing himself a disservice. Thus, as he listened back to the records fans had suggested, he asked himself one question: "How do you most fully embrace making a record in your forties and have it be awesome?"

Well aware of the fact he'd never be competing with the likes of "Wet Leg, Amyl and The Sniffers, or even Ed Sheeran" on the charts, Lee realised that it was his own humour and honesty that would set him aside–concepts that had followed him ever since he wrote Noise Addict's "I Wish I Was Him" about The Lemonheads' Evan Dando.

"Humour for me has always been part of the way I process what I want to say," he explains. "I'm just leaning back into that, and the songs just started coming."

TYLER JENKE *was named in TMN's 30 Under 30 Awards for journalism.*

After playing some of the songs live while touring his *Quarter Century Classix* cover album, audience response made Lee realise that the songs which many fans called "the best songs [he'd] written in years" were in fact worthy of exploring further. Eager to record his next album with a full band, the impact of a global pandemic soon saw these plans halted and traded for remote completion. Producers such as Jon Brion, Shamir, Sadie Dupuis, and Darren Seltmann were recruited, as were musical guests like Zooey Deschanel, Money Mark, Megan Washington, Sally Seltmann, and Georgia Maq.

The result is an album which is indeed amongst some of Lee's best work, and mixes in his trademark humour and titular fun with aspects of self-reflection, humility, and his own personal journey. Fittingly, "Born For This Bullshit" manages to encapsulate the entire Ben Lee journey and philosophy into one of his catchiest verses to date:

"Desires? You repressed them, I joined three cults and left them/You've come to sad conclusions, I'm looking for some new solutions/In love with your depression, I advocate rebellion/It's your prerogative but I'm staying positive."

When Lee references his history with cults, he's not just using clever metaphors. He'll gladly explain that life is nothing but a vast learning experience, and that he did indeed find himself involved in systems of belief which could fall under such categorisation.

"I'm someone who, when I do something, I do it 100 percent."

"I'm someone who, when I do something, I do it one-hundred percent," he explains. "So If I'm going to try out something, it's like I'm throwing myself in."

As he goes on, he looks back to two major tangents in his life that he describes as "spiritual explorations", yet ultimately helped to deepen his sense of commitment to his own autonomy and free-thinking nature.

"There was an Indian guru who I got involved with, and we actually got married there," he recalls, referring to his 2008 marriage to actress Ione Skye in India. "It was very like one of these types of Hindu mystics, and it's very much part of that culture. That person was called Narayani Amma, and that was a journey that went through about five or six years."

"The second bit was ayahuasca and working with a Peruvian shaman and psychedelics and everything," he continues. "That led to me breaking free of that dynamic with the guru, but it trapped me in another dynamic."

Ultimately, he explains that these are periods in his life that aren't worth hiding from, but that he is embracing, given that they're tantamount to bad relationships, and can ultimately serve as learning experiences. However, he notes it's important to maintain a sense of awareness and to remain conscious that cults can manifest in countless forms of belief systems – regardless of their proximity to 'typical' cult-like topics such as politics, religion, or health.

"I thought it would be useful for me to be transparent about the fact there's nothing shameful inherently about having been swept up in something, because it offered some answers in a confusing time," Lee explains. "But also that you, as a human, are never out of chances to get your head into reality."

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Bette Midler

"I think there aren't enough troublemakers."

p. 40

Ben Lee

HOWEVER, WHILE THE record does indeed feature an overwhelming message of positivity, it's not without self-reflection. One song, fittingly titled "Arsehole", sees Lee reflecting on his younger behaviour: "When I was younger I was an arsehole," he begins. "Burning down bridges, fighting with strangers, destroying everything I could, just because".

While the track focuses on his rowdy, headstrong nature as a kid, it's also something of a reflection on his youthful confidence, which many could misconstrue as arrogance. Famously, Lee described his 1998 album *Breathing Tornados* as the "greatest Australian album of all time". The likes of Powderfinger's Bernard Fanning responded by calling him a "precocious little cunt", a term which would later adorn T-shirts sold by Lee.

Likewise, even bands such as US outfit The Ataris and Melbourne group Klinger both released tracks called "Ben Lee" which attacked this perceived arrogance. While the former was more cutting (and later even covered by its namesake), the latter was more playful, and preceded Lee working with Klinger guitarist Dave Rogers.

"There's so many levels to it," Lee explains. "You try to psychoanalyse yourself and you want to understand why you do the things you do, and with a song like 'Arsehole', I'm reckoning with that. But it's interesting because I think in that song there's shame and there's also pride.

"I think there aren't enough troublemakers. I think that the reason the planet is in the shape it's in is because there's far too much acceptance of the status quo. And I think politically, environmentally, certainly in terms of activism, but artistically and politically, we need troublemakers. It's the only way we learn to think differently about things."

To this day, Lee still relishes the title of being a troublemaker. Just a month after we would last speak, he made headlines for getting a video removed from TikTok due to "harassment and bullying". In the video, Lee set his sights on a feud with Murray Cook of The Wiggles, ending a three-minute story about eggplants, cupping exercises, and drum positioning by stating, "Fuck you Murray, you know exactly what you did!"

Received in good humour by Cook, the post once again showcased Lee's fun-loving nature, his wicked humour, and his tendency to be misinterpreted by the public.

ULTIMATELY THOUGH, BEN Lee has crafted a career that is almost explicitly underlined by the very notion of not being cohesive – at least not on paper. It's a career that has seen him collaborate with actors and actresses (including two records with *How I Met Your Mother* actor Josh Radnor as Radnor & Lee), venture into acting himself with Tony McNamara's *The Rage in Placid Lake*, focus on new-age music on *Ayahuasca: Welcome to the Work*, make the Islamic faith accessible to young children with *Ben Lee Sings Songs about Islam for The Whole Family*, perform a song-for-song cover of an entire *Against Me!* album, and even turn Tom Robbins' *B is For Beer* into a musical (which will be adapted into a film this year).

But while there are so many things that *shouldn't* work, it's the confidence and tenacity that is so inextricably linked to Ben Lee that *makes* it work. It's exactly why an album called *I'm Fun!* is bound to be remembered as one of his most accomplished and beloved works to date. But it's also why it's an album that manages to touch upon more serious topics, and in typical Ben Lee fashion, address them with a sense of levity that makes them easier to deal with.

"The future's not bleak, because no one knows the future. The present is bleak. The future; we're going to create," he explains. "Simply imagining the possibility of positivity about the future completely changes our relationship to it.

"I'm not asking people to walk around with rose-tinted glasses, and the realism about human hurt and fallibility is really important to me. And I think that is a big part of this album–admitting that we make a lot of mistakes, and we hurt each other, and we look back on our past and go, 'Why did I do that?' But even that can be something to be embraced."

It's this type of thinking that sees *I'm Fun!* embrace topics such as lockdowns, parents experimenting with altered states of consciousness, fearlessness, and being a square peg in the round hole of life. And of course, true to his nature, he gladly admits that not everyone will resonate with his latest work, but as long as he's gone all-in, that's all that matters.

"That's something I've earned through years of doing it my own way," he explains. "Look, not everything I do is going to be genius, but it is going to be interesting."

The TEEKS Effect

He's become one of New Zealand's most *prized* exports, and now he's ready for the global stage.

By **Poppy Reid**

FANS, MOSTLY WOMEN, are wiping away tears. Mini-baths are rising in their eyes. They whoop and holler through the emotion, like a heart-broken girl in a nightclub, trying to dance away the pain. Only these fans seated at Sydney's iconic Opera House aren't in pain; they're blissfully happy.

It's Teeks' debut performance in Sydney on this cold June evening. Watching him fill the sold-out Joan Sutherland Theatre with a full band, a string section – and the voice and presence that has been likened to Adele – it's a fitting setting for his first ever harbour city show. It's also a demonstration of Teeks' inherent impulse to occupy colonised spaces. The Opera House itself is seen by many as a symbol of White Australia's culture, and therefore of Australia's racist history. And so, as Te Karehana Gardiner-Toi created a fireside atmosphere, where adulating feedback in real-time was welcomed and responded to, it wasn't lost on many of us just how grand a statement this show was.

We were hanging off of every acknowledgement of tangata whenua (people of the land), and every bit of between-song banter – especially the parts about his life growing up near Hokianga and in Tauranga in New Zealand, and the songs his Nan would play to him in her car. He performed one of them, "E Ipo" by Prince Tui Teka, entirely in his first language, te reo Māori.

Speaking to *Rolling Stone* from his label Sony Music's headquarters in Sydney the day after the show, Teeks explains the culture shock of relocating from Doubtless Bay, where he attended alternative education school Te Kōhanga Reo, to NZ's biggest city Auckland in 2013.

"I realised how lucky I was as a kid to be raised with the language," he says. "There was a whole generation that didn't have the opportunity because their parents didn't want them speaking Māori. It was out of fear you know," he explains, "they were scared for their kids, so it was understandable. There was a lot of discrimination, they got beaten [for speaking te reo], so there was a lot of trauma."

DANNI BISHARA

Surrender

IF FAMILY IS a factor in the formation of a person's identity, then Teeks is Tāne Mahuta, the "God of the Forest" kauri tree in New Zealand's North Island, with roots extending well beyond its base. He understands the necessity of moving in colonised spaces in order to keep his own language and culture alive. But, like all First Nations from Aotearoa, he knows that much of Western society's ailments – climate change, natural resource exploitation, pollution – could be lessened by listening to and engaging with Kaumātua, Māori elders.

"The world, the western world as you know it, is built out of patriarchy and whiteness," Teeks says, with a wisdom that feels inherited. "I've had to grow up walking two different worlds. I grew up as a Māori kid and still have the Māori worldview, but I also had to learn to operate in the western world. I think there's so much that we can learn from Indigenous cultures. I think if we want to heal the world; if we want to heal people, then we need to turn to Indigenous knowledge."

There's a reason why protests have erupted Australia-wide against the continued destruction of cultural sites. There's a reason why First Nations peoples are leading demonstrations against the local governments that have betrayed their communities. As Teeks explains it, it's not because these people want to be political activists, it's because it's their duty.

"You don't have the choice but to be political or to be an environmentalist, as an Indigenous person," he says.

MATAARA STOKES

"YOU DON'T HAVE THE CHOICE BUT TO BE POLITICAL OR TO BE AN ENVIRONMENTALIST, AS AN INDIGENOUS PERSON."

TEEKS' DEBUT ALBUM, *Something To Feel*, has been out in the world for over a year now. In that time it has walked people down aisles at their wedding, soundtracked over 270,000 TikTok videos, including those featuring gender reveals, pregnancy photoshoots, and loved-up couple moments. It also topped the NZ Album Chart, spawned two Top 10 Singles ("Younger" and "Oil and Water"), and has been certified Gold.

Known for his exquisite lyricism, brimming with emotion and tear-jerking vulnerability ("Power" could heal even the most broken heart), Teeks is the kind of artist who likes to meet his maker when the opportunity arises. He'll hit rock bottom, like he did in 2017, and come out the other side filled with gratitude. During that particular spell, around the time of his EP *The Grapefruit Skies*, he was jobless, homeless, sleeping on friend's couches, and feeling bittered by a career that felt attainable but just out of reach.

"Sometimes, when you're young you just..." he stops himself. "You want something so bad and you know you can do it, but it's just the frustration. It's like, 'Everything's not going how it's meant to be'.

"But I have learned to be patient," he adds. "I understand that timing is everything, now. And that things happen when they're meant to happen, I'm a big believer in that."

I'm transported back to the night before. Teeks and his eight-piece backing band, complete with a string quartet, are filling the Opera House with a reverberating cinematic soundscape befitting a Christopher Nolan film. "Through It All" was actually written as a hypothetical James Bond theme song, and while it's hard to top the Bond scores released by the likes of Adele and Billie Eilish, the song shows Teeks' vast songwriting range. The commercial world is already taking notice. Teeks has landed sync deals with Kiwi telco giants 2degrees and Spark, another for Netflix show *Easy* and a TV commercial for Whittaker's chocolate.

"I'm glad that I didn't get the opportunities that I have been given earlier," Teeks says, pausing. Perhaps he's filling in the timeline of highlights between 'rock bottom 2017' to now. "I wasn't ready." ®

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MATAARA STOKES

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PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT:
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TSEHAY
Pants & Jacket: Strateas Carlucci leather
Feather Jacket: Birds of a Feather couture
Shoes: Steve Madden

ANTHONY
Pants & Shirt: COS
Jacket: Strateas Carlucci
Shoes: Cole Haan

SIMON
Pants and Jacket: Strateas Carlucci
Shirt: COS
Shoes: Salvatore Ferragamo

LACHY
Pants & Leather Jacket: Strateas Carlucci
Shoes: Salvatore Ferragamo

PHOTOGRAPHY
GIULIA GIANNINI MCGAURAN

The Wiggles' WACKY WORLD

If every decade has a trend, the Twenties have been hit with an injection of Nostalgia. Everything old is new again. Nostalgia has kept many of us sane for more than two years as we did our utmost to dodge an invisible mutating virus that moved through thin air. Thank fuck for nostalgia. It's why – at least in part – The Wiggles have punctured pop culture.

BY **JAKE CHALLENOR**

The Wiggles' WACKY WORLD

THE WIGGLES are the soundtrack to some of our earliest, fondest memories – our first concert, our first film, our first album, our first toy, and our first dance. Much of the western world's youth were raised on a diet of The Wiggles. And as the past and present collide, an outbreak of nostalgia has birthed a new generation of skivvy worshipers – with a contemporary twist.

Lil Nas X wants to collaborate with them, Hollywood A-lister Steve Carell wants to join them, and The Kid LAROI surprised fans in June with a "Toot, Toot, Chugga Chugga" rendezvous ("This next guest is the fucking Wiggles!") during his sold-out set at Rod Laver Arena in Melbourne. Thirty-one years after making their debut, history is repeating itself: Welcome to The Wiggles' wonderful renaissance.

"BLUE MINION, MOVE to your left. Dorothy, a little to the right, please. Wags, take one step forward for me. Okay, hold those positions." The Wiggles' director Aaron Hill has, on this fresh autumn day in May, been tasked with shooting a frivolous viral video starring Steve Carell and The Wiggles to promote *Minions: The Rise Of Gru*. "Ready, set, action," he yells to the four familiar characters in front of us. They're dancing in a single row, as best they can, despite the fact that they can't see their noses from within the black-as-night darkness of their elaborate and heavy costumes.

The brisk chill felt outside The Wiggles' Hot Potato Studios – roughly forty kilometres inland from the CBD, in suburban Sydney – evidently hasn't made its way inside. There is an obvious sweaty sheen spanning the faces of everyone in the studio. Three publicists, a director, producer, cameraman, audio technician, dancers, and the crew that will tomorrow strip The Wiggles of their skivvies to photograph them for the cover of *Rolling Stone*, are scattered across the room, seated on uncomfortable aluminium deck chairs. Despite the discomfort, it feels good to step back into the wacky world of The Wiggles. It's a utopian place like no other. I first met The Wiggles four weeks earlier in Brisbane, when I was thrust into their orbit and inducted with open arms. "Nothing is off-limits," I'm told. "Expect the unexpected."

We're on the ground floor of Hot Potato Studios. Long and windy corridors are lined with memorabilia. Plaques, awards, photos, posters, and advertisements litter the beige walls. It feels more like a museum, harbouring over thirty years of memories. There are old sets (including the original, but worse for wear, Big Red Car), and shelves piled with awards (more than twenty of them), all reminding visitors that they are in the presence of entertainment royalty.

Although plenty have tried, no other children's group in the world has managed to come close to The Wiggles' legendary status.

Between the walls sits a large television studio where The Wiggles make their programs, a recording studio where they make their albums, a hair and makeup department, a wardrobe department, and a props room packed floor to ceiling. There's a section dedicated to oversized fruits and vegetables like coconuts and pumpkins. An old wooden puppet of OG Purple Wiggle Jeff Fatt sits on a dusty old road case; it looks ready for a cameo in a *Child's Play* prequel alongside Chucky. A large stuffed horse is draped over a vintage Wiggles-branded jukebox. There's an almost unlimited number of artificial roses bunched into milk crates – which I suspect are for Dorothy, whose diet consists solely of red petals.

It's the kind of place you want to bring your friends to spend the night playing dress-up, an acid trip without the comedown. The possibilities are literally endless. There's Kylie Minogue's butchered pink skivvy (I'm told she "cut the neck" to make it "more flattering" on her), or one of Captain Feathersword's many pirate hat and eye patch combos. The place is as magical as it is mystical, triggering childhood memories as we pass through each room. Back in the studio, there's a flurry of activity as an unreleased Tame Impala track booms out of a Sony mega box.

JAKE CHALLENOR *is Editor of Rolling Stone AU/NZ Magazine, and Executive Editor of Variety Australia and The Music Network.*

TSEHAY
Full Outfit: Song For the Mute
Shoes: Steve Madden
Accessories: Cendré

SIMON
Full Outfit: Song For the Mute
Shoes: Cole Haan

ANTHONY & LACHY
Full Outfit: Song For the Mute
Shoes: Salvatore Ferragamo

> “I didn't know what a shoey was, but of course Murray did.”
>
> **Anthony Field**

The Wiggles' WACKY WORLD

"Shall we hit play on this song?" Hill asks Minions publicist, Lori Killesteyn, who today is moonlighting as a producer. "We might not be using this song," she confesses to the four actors in oversized costumes, all patiently standing under the warmth of studio lights, well past breaking a sweat. "Don't worry too much about staying in time," Killesteyn says. "It's just to get the vibe going." The song is Tame Impala and Diana Ross' funky collab, "Turn Up The Sunshine". Unlike the cast of characters in front of us, the track is unfamiliar to everyone in the room. Its commercial release won't come for another week, which is when the world will also learn that it appears on the soundtrack for the latest iteration in the popular *Despicable Me* franchise.

Blue Minion, as the director is referring to him, looks stoned. Did he have a big session the night prior, I wonder? Topless, his large oval eyelids are halfway south. He's wearing pants at least, a patchwork of Seventies-inspired denims with a bandana around his canary yellow domed noggin. The second Minion, who the director has chosen not to name for ease, appears more child-friendly than her drowsy offsider. I make a quick note to ask where a Minions stylist might shop, but forget to bring it up. This Minion is modelling a psychedelic pink top with yellow, black and white Seventies swirls stretching across the fabric, which barely makes it around her girthy barrel frame. On the bottom half, it's crisp white bell bottoms that fall just short of her ankles, held up by a white belt with a centred dandelion yellow button.

In pursuit of the perfect take, the tiresome process of filming a soon-to-be viral video repeats itself over and over again. It's trial and error, but, eventually, the director gets a take he seems happy with. "Good job," Hill announces to the room, looking relieved. All four begin to unmask, taking in large gasps of warm studio air like its fresh oxygen. The fantasy begins to fade as one of the three publicists chimes in, possibly to kill the clapping which erupted, "Everyone together for a photo, please." The four actors reinstate their masks, and like magic, The Wiggles appear.

There's Blue Wiggle Anthony Field, Red Wiggle Simon Pryce, Purple Wiggle Lachlan Gillespie, and the group's newest member, Yellow Wiggle Tsehay Hawkins. They bounce onto the set, surrounded by Dorothy, Wags, and the two Minions. "Right, you are all going to do the John Travolta pose," says another Wiggles publicist, Michael Hickson, who takes control, ensuring plenty of behind-the-scenes snaps are gathered and stored on some secret hard drive until the

"Being asked to do ‘Like A Version’ was kind of weird for people at first, and maybe even us too."

Simon Pryce

movie is announced, and this clip makes its internet debut. The Wiggles' longtime publicist and protector, Bec Brown, leans in and whispers, "You know you can't use any of this until it's released, right?" She simultaneously hands me a tepid cup of coffee with three inches of foam. She's got me good, the pro knows caffeine is every journo's heroin.

TALKING TO EVERYONE in and around The Wiggles' very large camp, nobody can quite put their finger on the secret sauce that has made the group – formed in 1991 by Field and ex-members Murray Cook, Jeff Fatt, and Greg Page (plus Phillip Wilcher, who split after album one) – one of Australia's biggest music exports. The friendly foursome met while studying early childhood learning together at Macquarie University in Sydney. It's this education that is deeply woven into the DNA of The Wiggles and has remained part of the fabric that underpins everything they do. That, and family values. Just about everyone in The Wiggles' wacky world is related by blood, marriage or some other means. The producers of *Who Do You Think You Are?* would have a field day, I think to myself.

At the end of 2012, Cook, Fatt and Page retired. They were replaced with Gillespie, Pryce and Emma Watkins, who became the band's first female member. Many feared it would be the end, that the magic couldn't be reconstructed. But Field, feeling like The Wiggles were only just getting started, refused to buckle. He wasn't going anywhere. Field's brother, Paul, who managed the multi-million-dollar Wiggles Inc. empire for more than two decades, remembers that period – and his younger brother's defiance – vividly.

"There was someone working with us who said, 'Oh, it might be easier if you do go'," recalls Paul, who rings me from the car as he jets across the Sydney Harbour Bridge en route to a meeting about his new kids project, Peachy Keen. Field stood his ground: "But I want to keep going!" And, of course, he did. "Even though the lineup evolves and changes, Anthony will eventually be the old guy with a cane in the theatre saying, 'Okay, one more time'," says Paul, who reveals that *Play School* once turned Field away after an audition. He is also able to answer my burning question, declaring Field the secret sauce to The Wiggles' success. It was the humble Blue Wiggle who held the vision, and had the passion, to modernise the band and bring together a melting pot of talent to push The Wiggles into uncharted territory, for new audiences. But no family is perfect.

It wasn't long before Watkins and Gillespie began dating and wedding bells beckoned. The pair announced their engagement in 2015 and tied the knot in 2016, but the pressure of living and working together had proven too much; by 2018 they separated. In October last year, fan favourite Watkins stunned the Blue Wiggle as she shared her intent to quit the lineup after almost a decade on the road ("I didn't see it coming," he confesses). Her shock departure, however, made way for The Wiggles' to shimmy and shake into the twenty-first century. The arrival of Tsehay Hawkins was celebrated by fans and media. Her representation for young people of colour will be felt for decades. The only negative reaction came from an outspoken conservative Nationals senator who told a Murdoch paper that the new line-up would destroy the group. "It was nice while it lasted. But you go woke, you go broke," the senator said. Jokes on him. Words can hurt, but thankfully the opinions of old, white and irrelevant politicians are mere clickbait in 2022. The Wiggles are bigger and more relevant today than they have ever been.

Sixteen-year-old Hawkins is a trailblazer. Born in Ethiopia, she was adopted by her Australian parents – mother Robyn, and father Reg – at five months old. The talented dancer and actor, who attended the famous Brent Street performing arts academy in Sydney, is now home-schooled. Hawkins first appeared with The Wiggles a year earlier, in a viral 'Renegade' dance challenge with Watkins on TikTok. She remained part of the ever-growing cast of performers that the group regularly enlists for live performances, music videos and television shows.

"Tsehay initially came in as a dancer, a Red Wiggle," Anto, as he's known to friends, tells me as we walk around the studio where the group makes all its content for broadcast and online channels. "That TikTok video with Emma has four or five million views," he adds. "We actually asked her to join us the day after Emma resigned. She was born for this role, and we also wanted to reflect the diversity of Australia." The offer was made over Zoom, and within days Hawkins was standing in front of cameras as the new Yellow Wiggle.

Now a year into the gig, Hawkins recounts the days after that fateful virtual meeting that would upend life as she knew it. "OMG, yes!" is how she responded to the invitation from Field, and his nephew Luke, general manager of Wiggles Inc. "Mum was next to me, crying. Dad was in the background trying to keep Kendly, my little brother, quiet. It was the first day out of lockdown, so we drove straight to the studio and shot photos and started promo that day." The next day Hawkins was on Channel Seven's breakfast TV show *Sunrise*, followed by fifteen more interviews.

Her smile is infectious. Talking to Hawkins, you get the sense of a wise head on young shoulders. She is confident, intelligent and grateful to be waking up at sparrow-fart to meet the demands that the yellow skivvy commands. She's also very self-aware. The gravity of her appointment to the world's biggest kids band is not the least bit lost on the teenager.

"I was so nervous the day that The Wiggles announced I was replacing Emma. But I got an overwhelming outburst of support straight away. I was actually really surprised at how positive the feedback was, and how open to change the fans were, they just want to see singing and dancing. It's so beautiful seeing kids at the shows with sunflowers in their hair," says Hawkins, referring to her first contribution to the yellow skivvy's legacy.

Within days of becoming a full-time Wiggle, Hawkins was on the receiving end of an endless stream of love and support. Much of this came from a cheering chorus of minority groups celebrating for the generations that will grow up seeing someone who looks like them on the world stage. "A lot of the adoption community made contact," she recalls, "and people from the African community. My little brother is Columbian, and I do salsa dancing, so even the Latino, and Afro-Latino communities all reached out and said 'We are proud to have you representing us up on TV'."

Hawkins' anointment has also inspired a reclamation among young people of colour. "I've seen little girls now wanting to wear their natural hair. A lot of kids straighten it to look like TV stars," she explains. "It's really beautiful to see that they are embracing what they look like and that it's okay to be different. I didn't have that representation growing up. It's amazing that kids of colour are looking up to me," she says, fighting tired eyes from the 4:00 a.m. alarm.

"I've started getting used to all the craziness here, it's never a routine. Amazing things seem to pop up every second," she admits, referencing the present day in which she just shot a viral video with Oscar-nominated Carell and Minions, and is now sitting down with *Rolling Stone* for this interview. Tomorrow she heads into rehearsals for The Wiggles' brand new, as yet unannounced, TV show. "You never know what's going to happen each day," she says. "I'm loving it, every second of it. Being on the road, touring, is my favourite."

The Wiggles' WACKY WORLD

We're sitting in the Hot Potato Studios canteen, up on level one, which feels more like a large family kitchen. People stream in and out. Everyone stops for a chat while they make a cuppa, not realising that an interview is taking place. Hawkins, Gillespie and Pryce are all seated opposite me at one of the five or so dining tables in the room. Like big brothers protecting their younger sister, the Purple and Red Wiggles sit on either side of Hawkins, like bodyguards. As we slowly sip another tepid, frothy coffee, she recalls her earliest recollections of The Wiggles.

"Songs like 'Dorothy (Would You Like to Dance?)' and 'Can You (Point Your Fingers and Do The Twist?)' are embedded in my brain," Hawkins says, with a genuine ear-to-ear grin. "I've got videos of me dancing around the house to those songs. We only had the CD singles at home and we'd put them on repeat, it probably drove my Dad mad."

LISTENERS OF RADIO station triple j have gone gaga for The Wiggles, and the feeling is mutual. It was an unsuspecting cover of Tame Impala's "Elephant", a psychedelic indie-rock anthem fit for stoners, that last year parachuted The Wiggles onto the playlists of Australia's youth, hard-to-reach tastemakers and inner city hipsters. The same hipsters, mind you, that regurgitated their deconstructed avocado on rye when ten months later the cover stampeded to the top of the Hottest 100. The cover song, recorded at the station's Sydney studios in late February as part of its breakfast show's weekly 'Like A Version' segment, surprised many – including Field.

"Someone explained that you do a cover version of something," he tells me from the level one boardroom at Hot Potato Studios. "Old school me suggested AC/DC, Jimmy Barnes, Sky Hooks, Ross Willson, Mental As Anything, basically some older Australian group that I love. But triple j gave us a list of more contemporary artists," Field admits, who struggles to recall the ten or so other artists that could have, possibly, maybe, been solely responsible for aiding and abetting what would inevitably become the most significant viral moment of the current decade for The Wiggles. I make a mental note to track down this list.

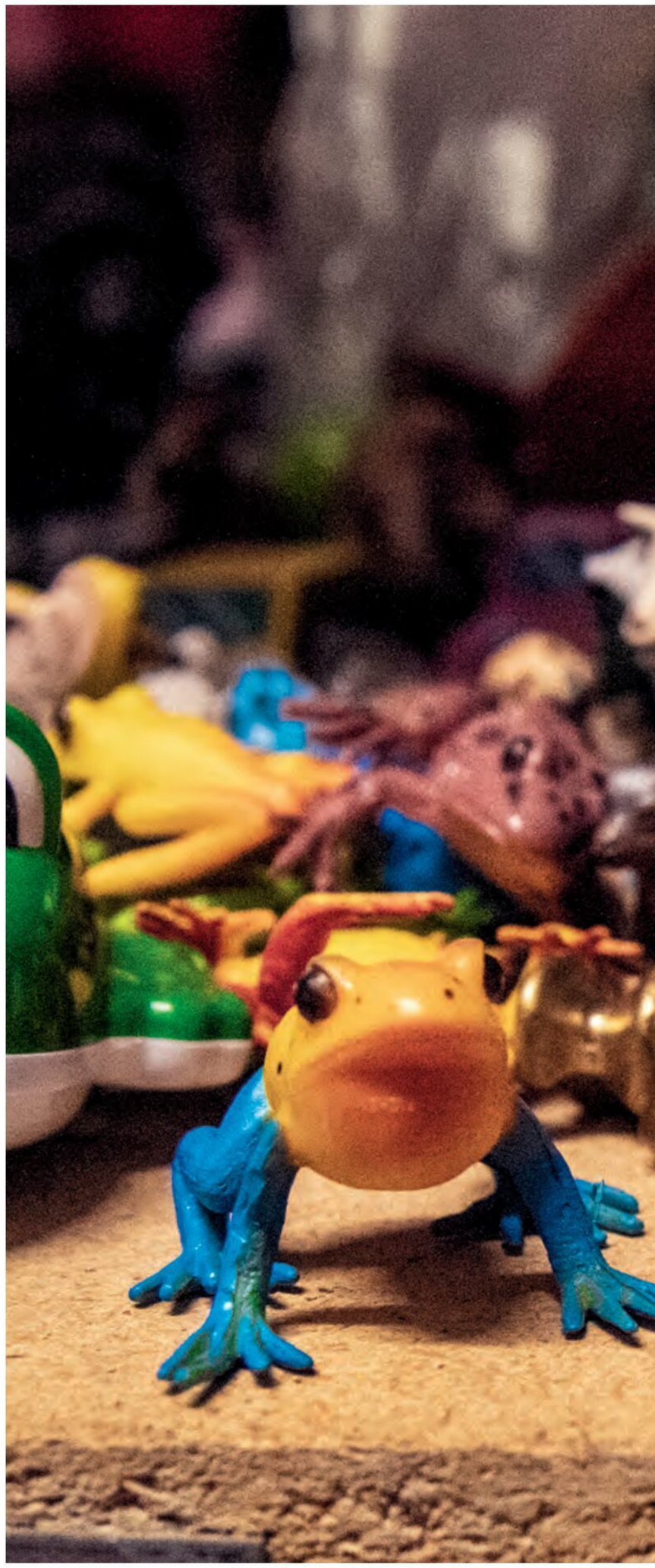
After cruising around the wiggly headquarters for two days, you get to know people. I'm introduced to Nick Webb, who has the fancy and important title of special projects manager. I've no idea what that means. I'm not even convinced he knows. But the hack in me realises that this man holds many secrets, plus he just looks cool. Webb joined Wiggles Inc. this year from the band's longtime record label, ABC Music, where he worked for more than seven years. ABC Music is the same label that took a gamble on The Wiggles' very first album, back when the market for locally produced children's music was non-existent. The independent label is also operated by triple j's parent, the government-funded ABC. Surely my new mate Webb can locate the original list of bangers that were pitched to The Wiggles?

As hoped, we've struck gold, folks. Webb's got the list tucked away in a draw. He dusts it off for me. Turns out The Wiggles had choices, fifteen of them to be exact. On the 'could have been' list were The Weekend's "Blinding Lights", PNAU's "Chameleon", Rihanna,'s "Umbrella", Sofi Tukker's "Purple Hat", Chemical Brothers' "The Salmon Dance", Amy Shark's "I Said Hi", Broods' "Peach", Glass Animals' "Heat Waves", Rex Orange County's "Loving Is Easy", Flume and Vera Blue's "Rushing Back", and, wait for it, "Old Town Road" by Wiggles fanboy, Lil Nas X. The Grammy winning artist recently tweeted his aspirations to collaborate with The Wiggles, a very real prospect. Both Nas and the OG Wiggles are booked to play Falls Festival this December.

"I went home to my daughter Lucia," says Field, and showed her the list." And Lucia said, 'Tame Impala'. The Wiggles got to work, spending full days in the studio rehearsing the track, with Field later having another of his genius strokes by song-sexing "Fruit Salad" and "Elephant" into a bangers-and-mashup-masterpiece. "When I first listened to the song, I thought it sounded easy, but when you play it, it's mad counts," he says, referring to the time taken up by each beat. "We practised every day, from ten in the morning until four in the afternoon. And when I played it for Lucia she loved it, I was so relieved.

"Emma is not a drummer, but she is a dancer and was able to pick it up. She did amazing. Lachy's voice was from heaven. Al (Alex Killer), our sound guy, taught me to play the bass for it. Jeff and Murray only learnt their parts the day before. There were a number of restrictions in the triple j studios, because of COVID. We couldn't get Greg in."

Lucia has good ears, as they say in the music business. She's also a talented singer and dancer (she attended The Australian Ballet School in Melbourne, has appeared in more than thirty Wiggles DVDs or TV shows), and regularly appears on stage with The Wiggles. And, by the time you are reading this, will have joined the lineup as a second Blue Wiggle, and an understudy for Field, who was diagnosed in 2018 with the very rare Lyme disease. At times the nerve pain was so intense that the only relief came from stretching his vocal cords with screams of sheer agony. It led to bouts of severe depression, all of which he believes came from his time serving in the army, where he also learnt to play the bagpipes.



Fast forward ten months, and The Wiggles' novelty take on a new-age bop struck a chord with Australia, catapulting them to top of the pops on the triple j Hottest 100 Countdown. "You could never plan it, not in a million years," says Red Wiggle Simon Pryce, who was on holiday in Shellharbour with his wife Lauren, son Asher and his sister, when the day-long event kicked off on January 22 this year. With no expectation of making the coveted listener-voted list, he stopped listening after The Terrys' "Our Paradise" came in at number seventy-six on the countdown, but later, feeling hopeful, they turned triple j back on. Moments after the station pressed play on "Elephant", Pryce celebrated in humble Wiggles fashion by walking a bag of rubbish to the bin and agreeing to do the dishes. "Being asked to do 'Like A Version' was kind of weird for people at first, and maybe even us too. Which is probably the beauty of it," he says.

Gillespie was driving from Brisbane to Sydney, and listened to the entire countdown from start to finish. He partly credits the success of "Elephant" to the fact that it included original members, Fatt and Cook. While Gillespie and Pryce were familiar with the countdown, Hawkins was not. "I didn't realise how big it was," she says. "All my friends were having a beach party. I was back at home, listening. When it got to number two – The Kid LAROI's "Stay" with Justin Bieber – the penny dropped: "Maybe we won!"

The Wiggles' WACKY WORLD

The Wiggles, a humble bunch, took it in their stride. The shitstorm of music snobbery in some circles didn't bother them – they knew it would offend. "It's voted by the public, it is what it is," Pryce says. "But I get that some people would be upset about it. I think my favourite story from all the controversy was from someone who got pulled over by police after the countdown for drink-driving, and blamed the fact that The Wiggles had won. That was his excuse, he was so angry." Pryce, along with Hawkins and Gillespie, roar with laughter at the notion that they, of all people, could be responsible for causing an alcohol-fuelled incident on a public holiday.

IT'S THE LAST day of April and an impressive twenty-seven degrees outside. Weaving and winding down Bicentennial Road towards the Brisbane Entertainment Centre, a strange sensation rushes through me without any warning at all. I'm about to be reunited with live music after more than two years of buffering livestreams, and more false starts than I care to number. Live music is back! Tonight Field, Fatt, Cook and Page will perform their sixth show as part of the 'OG Wiggles Reunion Tour' in front of more than seven thousand adulting fans, all bent on reclaiming their most innocent years.

Backstage with publicist Bec Brown – who has flown in from Sydney to conduct a who's who in the Wiggles zoo, and to manage the steady flow of crew that drift in and out over the course of the afternoon – I'm gradually introduced to everyone as we make our way from one green room to another before we eventually settle in the dining room. It's busy, not just because of the sizeable cast and crew, but because a Wiggles show is a family affair. Brothers, aunties, friends, cousins, partners, neighbours, kids and long-lost relatives enjoy the free catering and a fridge stacked with just about every drink you can think of – except alcohol, causing many who approach it to walk away disappointed (hours later, the Blue Wiggle led me to a chilly bin stacked with beer and wine). But despite the growing number of denizens, the atmosphere is oddly calm and relaxed. 'Not very rock and roll at all,' I scribble in a notebook.

Field walks into the room, barefooted. He responds to my question about putting the band back together and taking it around the country. He's recalling the first show on the seven-date arena run, in Darwin. It's a stop infamous among musos for wild tour shenanigans where anything can, and probably will, happen. He tells me that along with one punter's plea for the Blue Wiggle to skull a gin and tonic from a boot – "It was so out of control" – another adoring and delightful fan hurled her underwear on stage at Captain Feathersword before demanding that he return the garment to her. Field is not one to sit still for too long. He is in his natural habitat as he steps on stage to begin rehearsals. I watch in awe of the musicality in front of me. The Wiggles have chops.

Field's nephew, Luke, is also in his element as he shuffles his way around the empty arena to make sure The Wiggles sound flawless from every corner of the expansive room. "One of the misconceptions is that The Wiggles can't sing or play instruments, like The Monkees," he tells me, referring to the common rap that the "I'm a Believer" hitmakers were TV fakes. "Anthony can literally play any instrument you put in front of him – violin, bagpipes, bass guitar. Lachy, who has a beautiful voice, can play anything on keys after hearing it only once. They are all incredible musicians."

Luke reminds me that this tour was one heart attack away from not happening at all.

> **"Tsehay was born for this role, and we also wanted to reflect the diversity of Australia."**
>
> **Anthony Field**

Back in the green room, Field is emotional when asked what he recalls about that "absolutely horrible" Friday night in January, 2020. "Greg died in front of me," he says, recalling the evening that Yellow Wiggle Greg Page had a heart attack at the tail end of a bushfire benefit concert. It was the first attempt at putting the band back together. "It was traumatic and horrible for all of us, especially Greg. There was a fireman there, Jack Baldwin. No one ever mentioned him. He got up, held Greg's head, and took charge. Then a nurse came and helped. But it was all Jack," he explains, "it was his last night of firefighting after more than forty years. He actually introduced the show. After we walked off stage, we never saw [Baldwin] again."

Field tells me of a pact made with Page while he was recovering in hospital. "When we get the doctor's all-clear, for a last hoorah, we'll go around to every major city." And that's exactly what they did.

The Brisbane Entertainment Centre begins to fill up quickly as doors open. The energy is palpable. Unlike the earlier kids show, cups of cordial are replaced with cans of Canadian Club. A mosh pit hosts hipsters with dinosaur tails. Middle-aged women dance in their yellow tutus. Fathers with pirate patches dad-dance, awkwardly. And grandmas thrust signs – 'I Love You, Greg!' – into the air, just as they would have done at a Beatles concert seven decades earlier. The Wiggles have arrived.

Less than a minute into their set a superfan, bandaged in a fluffy pink onesie, scoots past security and joins everyone on stage. The room erupts with cheers, unphased by the intruder who knows every move. After "Fruit Salad", "Money Dance" and "Point Your Fingers" she is lured to safety by Henry the Octopus. Humongous inflatable replicas of Field, Fatt, Cook and Page are slowly ballooned to attention as they move through their set with remarkable stamina. Out of nowhere, Robert Irwin appears on stage to sing "The Crocodile Hunter," in a tribute to his Wildlife Warrior father. Now another giant inflatable, this time it's Dorothy the Dinosaur, makes its way through the crowd, igniting a fever dream among the two-pints-past tipsy crowd. The original Big Red Car, made of plywood, makes a comeback for "Toot Toot, Chugga Chugga, Big Red Car".

A full band stands behind the OG's. It's sounding more like a Cat Empire gig as The Wiggles jam classics from their first chart-topping album, *ReWiggled*. Reworks of contemporary classics like Rhianna's "Umbrella" and The Chats' "Pub Feed" sit next to collaborations with Polish Club ("Apples & Bananas"), Stella Donnelly ("Ba Ba Da Bicycle Ride") and DZ Deathrays ("Hot Potato"). *ReWiggled* is utterly preposterous and perfect in equal measure. But then again, so is the suggestion of four men in their fifties and sixties rocking out to songs about dinosaurs, big red cars and "yummy" fruit salad to a room packed with people of legal drinking age. But herein lies the wondrous magic of The Wiggles' wacky world, where the only limitation is your own imagination.

POP GOES THE WIGGLES

From Kevin to Kylie, everyone wants a piece of The Wiggles

▲ STEVE CARRELL:
The Wiggles with Hollywood A-lister Steve Carell, filming a viral clip for *Minions: The Rise Of Gru*. *May, 2022*.

▲ THE KID LAROI
Breakout star The Kid LAROI invited The Wiggles to join him on stage at his sold-out Melbourne show. *June, 2022*.

▲ KEVIN PARKER:
Tame Impala mastermind Kevin Parker on stage with The Wiggles at their OG Reunion gig in Perth. *April, 2022*.

▲ ROBERT IRWIN
Son of wildlife warrior Steve Irwin, Robert, joined The Wiggles in Brisbane to sing "The Crocodile Hunter". *May, 2022*.

▲ KYLIE MINOGUE
From the archives, honorary Pink Wiggle Kylie Minogue joined on *The Wiggles Go Bananas DVD*. *January, 2009*.

EDDIE BENJAMIN:

SURVIVING THE *FAME* STORM

BACKFLIPPING AUSTRALIAN SINGER-SONGWRITER EDDIE BENJAMIN HAS BEEN TAKEN UNDER BIEBER'S WING, BUT IT'S SELF-DETERMINATION THAT HAS HIM ENDURING HOLLYWOOD'S FAME STORM.

Content warning: This article mentions depression and suicide ideation and may be triggering for some readers. Please prioritise your wellbeing and know that support is available to you. To speak to someone, you can call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

BY POPPY REID

WEATHERMAN

EDDIE BENJAMIN

is backstage at a Justin Bieber concert in Michigan. He's wearing layered necklaces atop an Elton John 'Big Picture Tour' T-shirt scavenged from a vintage clothing store. He has the overtly excited expression of a Belieber who just met their idol for the first time. But in reality, 'backstage with Bieber' is business as usual for Benjamin who, prior to Bieber's Ramsay Hunt Syndrome diagnosis, has been opening for the global star every night.

When *Rolling Stone* chats to the Australian artist he's on date thirty-six of the Justice Tour and he's just stepped offstage. Tonight, when he performed his single "Speechless" – an education in R&B classicism with woozy synths – he closed his eyes to bring the energy down. When he opened them again, Michigan's Van Andel Arena was lit up with phone lights. "I was like, 'Oh my god I'm in space'," he says, eyes wide.

The singer-songwriter-slash-onstage-backflipper has been hard at work earning his place as one of the most exciting Australian exports to ever break America. That fact had never been clearer than at this point of the Justice Tour; crowds sang along to lead album single "Weatherman" verbatim, just weeks after its release. But, as is common with seemingly overnight success, the journey that led him to this green room couch was almost a decade in the making.

He had barely come out of childhood when he was performing at local jazz clubs in Sydney – his musician father in tow. Following the oft-travelled route of posting cover songs on social media (a few of which went viral but have since been removed) – plus a stint at Berklee College of Music and a few APRA AMCOS songwriting camps in between – the multi-instrumentalist relocated with his family to LA in 2019. And when he got an offer to join Sony Music in 2019, the major label helping to catapult careers of acts like The Kid LAROI, Amy Shark and MAY-A, he took it.

His collaborations reached lofty heights after his move to the US. His co-write credits sit alongside names like Meghan Trainor, Ryan Tedder, Shawn Mendes, and – thanks to an introduction from Trainor herself – Earth Wind and Fire. Then in 2021, the world received its first taste of just how global Benjamin's music is with his *Emotional* EP, featuring "Diamond Eyes", a collaboration with Australian music royalty Sia.

IN CONVERSATION, EDDIE Benjamin has a way of surprising you when you least expect it. In the midst of talking about his debut album – his team-up with Kid Culture (the Seattle producing-prodigy behind Bieber's hit "Yummy") – Benjamin reveals the toll that writing music has on him.

"When I make an album, I'm the worst person to be friends with," he says. "Honestly, I'm totally hyper-focused. Like it's awful. I'm just going to be completely real," he adds, with an arms-spread shrug. "When I'm in 'creation mode' of writing my album, writing an album for me, I don't know. I don't want to be friends with you very much.

"Maybe this is... who knows," he pauses, sounding as if he himself doesn't understand it yet. "But I just am so vulnerable, honestly. And what's a vulnerable person? They have a crazy amount of shields up. I definitely have that, because I'm being so honest with myself in that time period."

That vulnerability has given the world album tracks like "Only You" (written for and about his girlfriend Maddie Ziegler), "All For Nothing", and "This Place", which came from such great melancholia that Benjamin almost didn't include it on the record. Amid one extended spell of deep depression, Benjamin wrote "This Place" with Alex Salibian (best known for co-writing and producing Harry Styles' debut album).

"I was not in a good little spot that day, I remember," he puts it lightly. "I had a session that day and Alex is a really soft, quiet person and I kind of came into the room and just threw up this song."

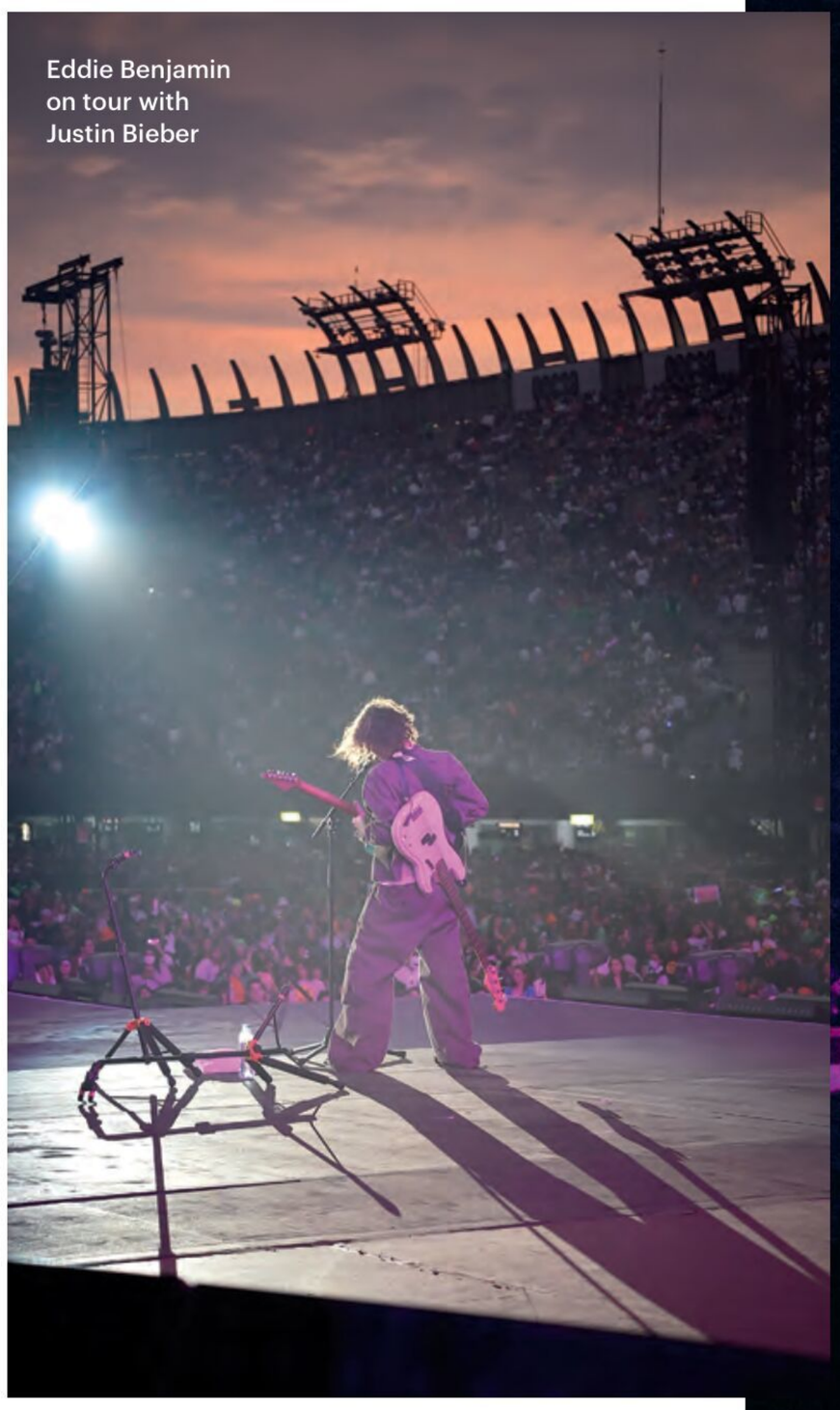
Musically, the song is a piano-driven arrangement that could rival Elton's "The One". Lyrically, it delves into the kind of deep pain only known by those who have felt the cavernous blue sinkhole collapse around them: "*'Cos I'm not really sure how to tell anyone / but I can't bear this pain / I think it's time to leave this place*".

"It was an awful session actually," Benjamin recalls. "I should ask him about that. It wasn't fun at all. I sang it. I remember, we recorded the whole bridge. The entire bridge. You know how it modulates up?" he adds, referring to the part at the one-minute mark. "I remember I recorded that and I was like, 'Take it out completely, throw it away'. For three hours, that was gone. I was just in such a...," he says, trailing off. "And then I was like, 'Bring it back'. I was just in a very, very interesting spot.

"[...] I was fed up with existence. I just was not in a good place. 'Oh, I'm trying to get out of here a little bit' is the most soft way to put it."

Looking back now, Benjamin is thankful he was convinced by his inner circle to put the track on the album. To him, processing his life through music while he's living it is an artist's privilege, and one he actively reflects on. He seems good at that; at understanding the weight of an experience and carrying that gratitude with him.

The first time I met Benjamin was in 2018 in a writing space at Sydney's Studios 301. At this point, he was like a boomerang, splitting his time between Sydney and LA. More wide-eyed then, but still indifferent to the trappings of La La Land, he was telling me he went to a party at famed vocal coach Stevie Mackey's house. Mackey's clients Selena Gomez and Jennifer Lopez were in attendance. "I'm sure I'll meet heaps of cool dudes," Benjamin said of his plans to head back. "But there's time for that."



Eddie Benjamin on tour with Justin Bieber

Four years, and plenty of 'cool dudes' later, his intentions haven't wavered since that first chat. "I definitely have the exact same goals and the goals are set for the exact same reasons as they were when I was fifteen." He smiles with that gap-toothed grin, an endearing reminder that LA Materialism and a desire for a Hollywood Smile hasn't gotten to him yet – despite his burgeoning success (his song "Weatherman" has clocked over 20.5 million streams and was one of the most used songs on TikTok in the US).

That's not to say Eddie Benjamin isn't immune to some of the trade-offs that come part and parcel with a public persona. It was in LA where Benjamin met his girlfriend Maddie Ziegler, a dancer and actress whose profile was far eclipsing his own when the pair began dating in 2019; she slid into his DMs on Instagram. The pair's inseparable union has meant his run-ins with paparazzi became unavoidable – an odd reality considering their young age.

One time, when Benjamin had travelled back home to Australia with Ziegler, they were followed home from Sydney airport. "I've never spoken about this, I don't even know if I'm allowed to speak on this," he stops to think, before shrugging. "Oh well fuck it, who cares." He tells me that even though he and Ziegler had security with them, a photographer tailed them all the way back to his parent's place in the Eastern Suburbs.

"I was like, 'What's happening?' Then me and Maddie would walk to the beach, and later we'd go on our phones and there's photos of us at the beach from five minutes ago, in Australia.

"[...] I try not to take it too seriously honestly. It's definitely an intense part of it."

POPPY REID *is Editor in Chief of Rolling Stone AU/NZ and was named Music Journalist of the Year at the 2022 Australian Women in Music Awards.*

Eddie Benjamin has joined Justin Bieber's global Justice Tour.

BENJAMIN KEEPS HIS inner circle tight. His family, his sister Marlo, his parents Huey and Narelle – all of whom made the move to LA with him in 2019 – remain close, alongside Ziegler and a select few "industry friends". And given the trajectory of his career, it's a good thing.

"I have been lucky to see what maybe some bad decisions can get you while you're doing this," he says. "And you know, how your energy can be tangled in fifteen trillion different places.

"[…] I'm not getting smashed every night, like going crazy," he notes. "Of course, I'm human. I like to have fun. But that being said, I feel like I have a good perspective of what's going on around me."

In a video posted to YouTube in 2020, Justin Bieber and Eddie Benjamin are seated side by side on a couch, singing an acoustic version of Bieber's song "That Should Be Me". Following the performance, in a cute display of the pair's 'jedi and padawan' dynamic, Biebs offers Benjamin a few words of advice.

"There's gonna be people who come around who want to just take, take, take," he said. "And if you're looking at the people who are just taking, you don't want to listen to their opinion. You gotta listen to the people who are feeding into your life."

Behind closed doors though, with cameras and lights turned off and neatly packed away, Bieber has been an open book for Benjamin. He's shared with him the harsh realities of being a superstar who grew up and made mistakes in the public eye – all while remaining an idol for a predominantly female fanbase.

"WHEN I MAKE AN ALBUM, I'M THE WORST PERSON TO BE FRIENDS WITH […] I'M JUST GOING TO BE COMPLETELY REAL."

"[Bieber said to me], 'Here's where I screwed up. I let all this crap in and it destroyed all my relationships. Here's what I'm doing now'," says Benjamin. "I feel like a piece of advice I stick to is 'keep your circle super close'."

NEVERTHELESS, BENJAMIN'S celebrity affords a level of access well beyond his 'super tight circle'.

"Only You" was partly written in Miami and during an unplanned two-week stint in Mexico. After missing paperwork at Heathrow airport put Benjamin at a crossroad, he had two choices; quarantine in London for eighteen days before waiting weeks for his missing form, or re-enter LA via Mexico. He chose Mexico.

"I was really bored and I texted Alessia [Cara] and I was like, 'I think you'd be great on this song'. […] Honestly, I wanted her husky kind of voice and someone who can do those kind of quick little pocket runs with me, and keep the tightness and sonic structure of that."

The irresistible single blends R&B with perforated flute parts, poetry, and a vivid invitation into Benjamin's heart. With such a slow-building pace and Alessia Cara's intimate vocals, it's probably the most romantic piece of music he's ever written.

Near the end of the track, amid the sauntering strings, it features an Easter Egg for fans. It's an audio sample lifted from a *Four Corners* segment from 1962 where Ray Taylor interviews Sydneysiders about the possibility of aliens. "I think it'd be an animal form, but I don't think it'd be like us," the interviewee says, leading us out of "Only You".

When I ask Benjamin about it, not having found the exact source of the sample just yet, he inhales through a tight smile. "I signed a pact with Kid [Culture]," he says, finally. "I couldn't say where that is from."

FINDING THEIR VOICE

WOMEN OF NINETIES ROCK ARE *BREAKING* THEIR SILENCE

Women of a certain age are now finding the confidence to talk about the darker side of entertainment.

By Jane Gazzo

CAROLINE KENNEDY: RIGHT: PIER CARTHEW, LEFT: STEPHEN GUILLE

When music journalist Jane Gazzo was researching for her latest book celebrating the fertile Australian music scene of the 1990s, it quickly became apparent that many female artists were remembering the time with a heavy heart.

For every Adalita and Sarah McLeod whose careers have transcended the 1990s, there were also the women who either by fault or default became casualties of the decade; who lacked the confidence and wisdom to speak up about what was going on around them and for whom support networks and mental health awareness was virtually non-existent.

For these women, the Nineties were about promising careers cut short, media cruelty, industry bullying, misogyny and double standards. They are now collectively finding their voices and breaking over twenty years of silence.

SINGER CAROLINE Kennedy was in her late twenties when she fronted Melbourne band Deadstar with former Hunters and Collectors guitarist Barry Palmer in 1995. Also in the group was drummer Peter Jones, who had replaced Paul Hester in Crowded House, as well as Crowded House bassist Nick Seymour.

Before Deadstar, Kennedy had fronted various indie rock bands and had enjoyed a degree of success with The Plums. But according to Kennedy, the media, and her management, seemed only interested in the high profile names attached to Deadstar.

"I was shamelessly worked like a donkey in a pit," she says matter-of-factly. "But I was also very lucky. It was a mixed blessing to be working with a bunch of older men who were already well known in Australian mainstream music circles."

Kennedy also discovered that being a frontwoman in a band in the late Nineties was open slather for snide music journalists to criticise everything about her – from her voice, to her looks and dress-sense.

"I was abused by lots of different people when I transitioned from The Plums to Deadstar," she states. "I did photo shoots where people told me my tits weren't big enough and they brought me a pair of tits in a box! I had that kind of thing happen to me frequently."

Kennedy found that standing up for herself and saying no to certain requests could paint her into a corner.

"I definitely got a reputation for being a difficult woman," she admits. "I couldn't fit easily into those clichés of decorative femininity. I'm not that kind of person and I never was."

When a Deadstar retrospective greatest hits collection CD was released without warning and with a photo of Kennedy which she hadn't approved, she baulked and had it pulled from the shelves.

"I was so angry, but I felt like I was being treated as an accessory."

Kennedy is proud of the body of work Deadstar produced over their six-year period, which included three albums and three ARIA nominations. Although emotional when revisiting her former band, she is far from jaded, using her experiences to empower the young female musicians she currently teaches at London's Goldsmith University.

She has been recording as a prolific solo artist under the moniker Caroline No since 2012 – a name chosen for the fact she didn't say no often enough during those Deadstar years.

So is it the passing of time, and the fact that she is older, wiser and surer of herself, that has given her the strength to speak up now, or is it that the culture has shifted just enough to allow her a voice?

She ponders the question.

"Experience has shown me that what I thought was 'just how things are' was in fact a construct. I know now that I have many more choices than I could ever have imagined when I was younger. When any of us speak about injustice, we create a space for everybody."

Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the musical spectrum, pop starlet Melissa Tkautz was just seventeen-years-old when she topped the ARIA charts with her debut single, "Read My Lips" in 1991. It earned a Platinum record and an ARIA for highest-selling single in 1992. Her follow-up single, "Sexy is the Word", went Gold, peaking at number three.

At the same time Tkautz was playing the rebellious Nikki Spencer on TV drama *E Street* and the soap's producers were keen to capitalise on her popularity. However, Tkautz believes that her age and naivety often resulted in the men around her taking advantage of her.

"I was never touched inappropriately, which I'm grateful for," she affirms. "And there were a lot of situations where I could have been; but I was in the care of men who either ripped me off or had a complete lack of respect for me as a young girl starting out in the music industry. They were the ones letting me down. I would say I was abused mentally."

Tkautz alleges that the men who ripped her off were the three managers who had come highly recommended by her record company, although no legal action was ever pursued. She is also keen to clarify that former managers Richard Wilkins and Penny Clifford were not part of this three, and speaks highly of both.

"I trusted the managers who I had in my family home, sitting at my dinner table, who were ripping me off blind behind my back. They were taking money out of my account, spending money on things which had nothing to do with me or my career. If I had found the manager I have now, the journey would have been a lot different for me and certainly a lot more enjoyable."

There was also the obsession from the media and those around her about how she looked. She was constantly told she was too fat, or too thin, and her weight spiralled.

"Then my boobs weren't big enough. Or they weren't perky enough. It was just insult after insult. The more famous I got, the more judgements I got."

Tkautz becomes emotional when recounting a particular experience involving a record producer who made her watch her own video clip to "Read My Lips".

"He sat me down and he said, 'Right, see how you look in this film clip? We need you to look like that right now in everyday life'. He was basically saying I looked shit and I needed to look how I looked in that video with my hair and make-up done all the time – forgetting of course that we had the best stylists and make-up artists on set and lighting. Imagine being seventeen and just coming into your body? It destroyed my confidence. I felt like the ugliest person in the world and my sense of self was so warped."

It's clear the experience is still upsetting. The passing of time has healed only so much. Therapy has also helped, but the thing Tkautz found most difficult to overcome was her trust in men. She was celibate for ten years whilst she worked through her trauma.

"I could not let a man in for the longest time because I was so scared they were going to tell me something about myself that was negative, and I couldn't go there. I'd been put down for so long," she says. "Sex was not something I was comfortable with at all."

"I TRUSTED THE MANAGERS WHO I HAD IN MY FAMILY HOME, SITTING AT MY DINNER TABLE, WHO WERE RIPPING ME OFF BLIND BEHIND MY BACK."

The irony of singing her hit single "Sexy is the Word", when she was feeling anything but, is not lost on Melissa now.

"I was singing 'Sexy' and the line *'hands off my detonator'* but mentally, I hadn't developed into the sexual being they were wanting me to portray in those songs. I hadn't found myself until I was in my twenties and I think that's where the problem lies. I developed at a very late age. I wasn't sexually active and I had very little life experience."

Today Melissa is a happily married mum of two, still performing and writing music while working on a number of acting projects. There is a deep sense of gratitude for the longevity of her career, which she mentions numerous times. While she may have the confidence to speak of the past, she believes, given the chance again, she would do things very differently.

"I would have protected myself a bit better and not been so trustworthy. I would have had more of a say, and if anyone had of passed judgement on what I looked like I would have told them to go fuck themselves."

JANE GAZZO *is a Melbourne based music journalist, broadcaster and published author, who appears regularly on ABC Radio and The Project.*

▲ "I think a lot of women are realising now that we do have a voice," says Melissa Tkautz.

► Pop starlet Melissa Tkautz found it difficult to overcome her trust in men after being taken advantage of in her formative career years.

Tania Lacy was an aspiring comedian and television presenter who shot to fame hosting the revamped *Countdown Revolution* on ABC TV from 1989-1990.

She had cut her comedic teeth on the network's Saturday morning show *The Factory*, where she would invent amusing characters and hilariously interview artists in different personas. ABC executives were quick to spot her talents and capitalise on them.

She was hired for *Countdown Revolution* on the proviso that she and co-host Mark Little, who was affectionately known to the nation as Joe Mangel in *Neighbours*, be as anarchic and crazy as they could possibly be. Their antics were a precursor to how *Recovery* would look on the same network just five years later.

Lacy and Little played up to the brief and their shtick became a ratings winner for the ABC. But that's when things changed.

Record companies threw big names at the show and the pair were told: 'be nice or else'. When Little referred to the boyband New Kids on the Block as "shit" and tried to set fire to their CD, all hell broke loose.

"Gone were the cries for anarchy," remembers Lacy.

"The new catch-phrase was, 'Stop tape! Don't say that. And roll tape'. We were no longer required to be anarchists. We were required to be the mouth-pieces to sell records," she recalls.

Suddenly, record companies were paying for trips to the US to interview pop stars and new equipment and shiny prizes appeared out of nowhere.

"This did not sit well with either Mark or I. We worked for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, a government organisation that was free from the confines that advertising brings. This was part of their charter, possibly the most important part. In effect, Mark and I were being forced to break the law.

"We were frustrated and felt a deep sense of betrayal, not just from the show's executives but also from within ourselves. We had betrayed our audience."

Lacy could have ended her tenure with *Countdown Revolution* then and there, but a wild idea to go on strike while live-to-air got the better of both hosts.

"Our plan was simple. Go to air, dump the rundown, and tell the truth."

If the producers wanted anarchy they were going to get it.

"We ripped up the rundown and said it like it was. 'The revolution is here! We are now officially on strike!'"

The pair were cut off as they went to video tape.

Pandemonium broke out on the floor. No one had any idea what was going on, except Lacy and Little.

"The producer approached us asking what was happening," remembers Lacy. "We explained we were protesting over their lies to us and those we had passed onto the audience. We no longer wanted to sell records for them so they could benefit with gifts and contraband."

The revolution was televised and has since been removed from YouTube, but the payoff was that Lacy's promising career came to a crashing halt.

The official word from the ABC at the time was that Lacy and Little were fired for staging a 'mock protest against bands miming'.

MELISSA TKAUTZ: GERRIE MISFUD

► Tania Lacy shot to fame hosting the revamped *Countdown Revolution* on ABC-TV from 1989-1990.

▼ Tania Lacy with fellow *Countdown Revolution* host Mark Little.

Lacy was fired by fax and told never to darken the door of the ABC again.

"My career fell into a deep hole and never truly recovered," she says with regret.

"It was like I was tossed onto the rubbish heap and then continually kicked by bad media. I was twenty-five years old. Can you imagine how intimidating it was to have these powerful men in their fifties and sixties saying stuff to you? The power imbalance was devastating.

"That was the end of my dealings with the ABC. I was not even allowed back on the premises to empty out my desk."

Lacy didn't perform again in Australia for ten years. She took on writing jobs to support herself and was diagnosed with a mental illness. She also undertook intense counselling.

"We don't accommodate mental illness in this country the same way we accommodate an illness like cancer. If you've got a mental illness there's not a one-size-fits-all solution or cure."

Lacy eventually fled to Germany, only returning to Australia during the pandemic. She's been reluctant to talk about her experiences until very recently when she poured everything into an entertaining one-woman-show called 'Everything's Coming up Roses' which she performed nationally, including at the Adelaide Fringe.

The response was almost life-affirming. Fans who remembered her from *The Factory* and *Countdown Revolution* had no idea what she'd been through, and the critic's reviews were glowing. She was called a legend and an icon.

"There was a realisation that I was doing something special," she states. "It's like you're put somewhere until people say, 'Oh we've forgiven her and she's learnt her lesson and isn't she fantastic?' But it's a real double standard because men like Wayne Carey can be involved in a massive sexual scandal one week, then back on TV hosting a footy show a month later!"

Lacy has made Queensland home now, where misogyny still rears its ugly head in the unlikeliest of places. She recently entered a comedy competition where the three judges, and the host, were all male. She called it out and the judges turned on her.

"What country in the world in 2022 has no women on a judging panel? Every time a woman came out, the host would make remarks like, 'Oh, we have another woman for you now', and after every performance he would pick them apart. It completely pissed me off."

What would Tanya Lacy have done differently, knowing what she knows now?

"I'm not sure I can answer that question because I don't honestly know. I have had to navigate all this by myself and I'm okay with that now," she says. "I'm working on my own shows and not relying on anyone else but me. I've taken my power back. That's the most important thing."

Two decades later, the music and entertainment industry's most pressing concern is committing to safety and wellbeing for all women, and shifting the culture that has been allowed to permeate. Major label HR departments are setting up task forces to encourage diversity, leadership and wellbeing. Awareness around mental health and what is now considered acceptable behaviour is allowing the inclusion of prominent voices to rise to the surface.

With artists calling out perpetrators, and more women bravely coming forward to share their experiences, there is a renewed sense of hope for the industry moving forward.

We still have a lot of work ahead of us but the noise is getting louder as more and more women gain the confidence to break years of silence.

"I think a lot of women are realising now that we do have a voice," says Melissa Tkautz.

"We are equal and I think we are becoming stronger and stronger – but I don't want it to be a situation where women are anti-men. It's all about respect and that's a two-way street."

Sound as Ever: A Celebration of the Greatest Decade in Australian Music 1990-1999 by Jane Gazzo and Andrew P Street is out now through Melbourne Books. ®

TANIA LACEY: PETER ROSETZKY

WHIPPY SPENDS FIFTY HOURS A WEEK PLAYING GRAND THEFT AUTO, livestreaming each ten-hour session on Twitch for his almost half a million followers. He commentates every game, volleys with his competitors, and engages with the comments thread in real time. It pays handsomely, “five figures a month,” he tells Rolling Stone over a video call from his new base in Brisbane, Australia.

Game Face:

WHIPPY'S ALL THAT

Words by Jake Challenor / Photo by Haze Alieu

Game Face:

WHIPPY'S

IS NEWFOUND success didn't come easy. Despite just signing a deal with global creator company Jellysmack, and inking a lucrative new multi-year agreement with Twitch, the content creator says the mental health impacts on gamers are very real, and at times, "very scary." In April, Whippy had a meltdown on camera. He wanted to quit, albeit briefly.

"Twitch streamers are expected to sit there and grind their arse off ten plus hours a day, and if you've got a problem with it, then you don't get paid," he says. "If you are not streaming on Twitch, your channel is dead. You don't exist. You are gone. And Twitch forces streamers to get into this mindset where you have to sit there for hours and hours and hours, read abuse from members of your own community who are nitpicking at everything that they do."

The scruffy Gen Zer is confident, you can't help but believe him. The twenty-two-year-old reveals that while he's not yet a millionaire, he's edging closer to becoming the seven-figure content creator he aspires to be. "I definitely don't earn more than a million dollars a year," he says. "It's close, but I'm not there. I will eventually be a millionaire."

The sunshine city is a long way from where it all began for Whippy – the gamer only recently graduated to the big smoke. Before moving north for "better internet", he had already begun to make a name for himself in the fiercely competitive Twitch community where you're only as good as your last game. Luckily for Whippy, his endless hours of roleplay streaming on the popular NoPixel server, masquerading as Irwin Dundee or Officer Crocodile Steve, are paying him dividends. It's a modern-day rags to riches fairytale in the making.

Whippy made his mark from a "crappy wooden shed" with a tin roof, barely held down by a single pole in the centre of the room to circumvent it from collapsing in on him. The shed, mirroring the size of a sub-standard office cubicle, is nestled behind his mother's modest home in a remote outback town in NSW, where the population is less than three-thousand. He declines to name the town on the record, but says the nearest Hungry Jack's or Macca's is one-hundred kilometres away. And, until a storm ripped through and took out the cell tower across the road, the internet was so bad that live-streaming was mission impossible.

"IF YOU ARE NOT STREAMING ON TWITCH, YOUR CHANNEL IS DEAD. YOU DON'T EXIST. YOU ARE GONE."

UNSPLASH; ELLA DON, UNSPLASH; FLORIAN OLIVO

JAKE CHALLENOR *is Editor of Rolling Stone AU/NZ Magazine, and Executive Editor of Variety Australia and The Music Network.*

"I loved games because I sucked at talking to people, and no one at school really wanted to be my friend. But because we were poor – my mum and dad split, and mum had nothing but welfare to feed us – we couldn't really afford new games.

"And then the cell tower got knocked out, which was bad. For two weeks we couldn't call anyone. It was terrible. No phone reception, no service, landline only. But they rebuilt it with a 4G tower, and that had fast internet. All of a sudden it gave me thirty [gigabytes] down, and thirty up."

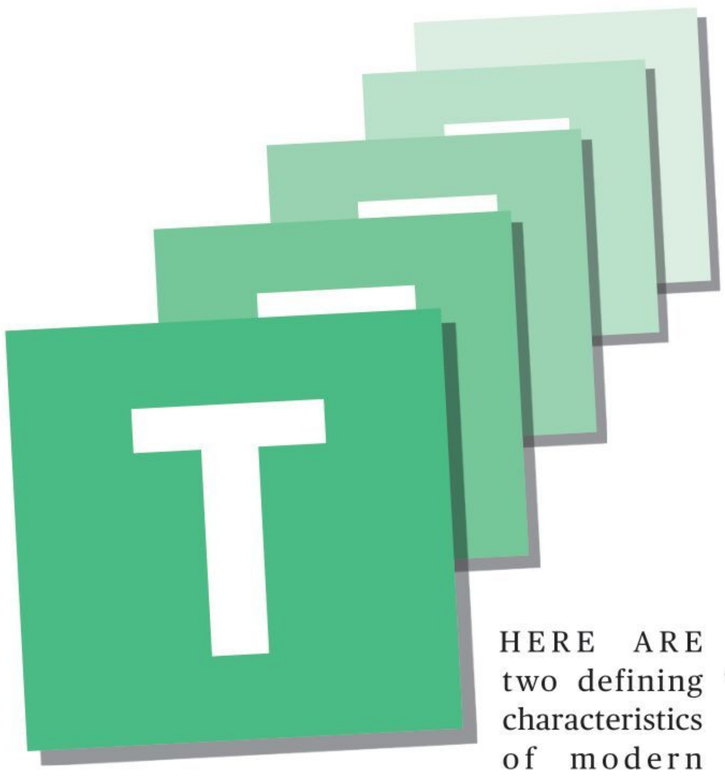
Whippy saw gold, got the itch for Twitch, and began streaming from the "stinky shed" that shook violently in the wind, with garbage bags over the windows to block out the light. He had no choice but to make a serious go of it. He needed to cover his mum's mortgage, and earn enough coin to afford his own rent if he had any hopes of escaping the dusty rural town to reach the big city lights where even better internet – and more opportunities – beckoned.

While most of us are sleeping, Whippy is working, grinding, hustling. It's not for everyone. It's certainly not for the faint-hearted, or the thin-skinned. But it is exactly how this unsuspecting dreamchaser plans to make a living, and a difference. "When this interview ends," he tells *Rolling Stone,* "I'm actually going to the bank to pay off my mum's mortgage." He smiles, proudly. "That's the next thing on my list today, pay off that damn house."

TAKE A WALK ON THE WEIRD SIDE:

NICHE INFLUENCERS TAKING OVER THE INTERNET

Words By BIANCA O'NEILL
Illustration By TWYLER SKEGGS



THERE ARE two defining characteristics of modern internet culture: virality and community. As social media took hold in the late Noughties, places like Tumblr lent Millennials a space to express their weirdness, putting their eccentricity on display, like a virtual reincarnation of London's King's Road. And in the same way that Vivienne Westwood and Malcom McLaren's SEX shop was a defining destination for the first wave of London's punk movement a decade later, Tumblr was a beacon for the hipster aesthetic that so-defined early Noughties Millennial culture.

A decade later we saw the rise of the influencer – and anachronistic return to the worship of 'norm' culture. Social media, for so long a place for niche interests and weird expression to thrive, became a place for people to signal their peak normality. Influencers were praised for their soulless depiction of life; the less politically engaged or divisively opinionated they were, the more successful they would become. This was, of course, of huge benefit to personal monetisation – after all, brands don't like controversy – but its impact on digital pop culture was significant and wide-ranging. The internet was born of elevating subcultures, but now the Kardashian generation wanted to create their own sleek, sellable reality show online.

It's really no wonder, then, that Gen Z rebelled – and a return to Tumblr's glory days of weird, niche, and occasionally bizarre content has found its rightful home on TikTok, far away from the filtered, curated feeds of ageing Millennial influencers. The Tumblr Girl, draped in an indie core aesthetic, was now the E-girl; the ironic hipster now a DeepTok fuccboi.

Aspiring influencers who took their #foodporn and #bodygoals Instagram personas a little too seriously were suddenly relegated to the online dustbin under the hashtag 'cheugy' – an urban slang potshot at trending content like pumpkin spice latte selfies and gender reveal videos, seen as cringy and embarrassingly 'norm'. TikTok signalled a changing of the guard, and thus, it heralded the declining relevance of Instagram.

Melbourne illustrator, Twyla Skeggs, is one of the few niche-content holdouts on Instagram, where she posts her own illustrated *Seinfeld* scenes on @twylamae, relating them back to current events or trending pop culture references.

"It seems like niche content emanates the strongest these days," she tells *Rolling Stone*. "I think maybe because we've become stressed-out oddballs searching for some meaning on the internet."

Skeggs found her own clique, connecting with fellow *Seinfeld* obsessives who lauded its 'show about nothing' take on the humour of banality. Over the years, her work has been reposted by *Seinfeld*, the *Broad City* girls, Clementine Ford, and Kyle McGlaughlin (Trey from *Sex and the City*). She was even sent a photo of Pete Wentz (Fall Out Boy) wearing one of her illustrated t-shirts.

"If you find niche content that feels tailored to you, it makes you feel special. Less lonely," she says. "I have a strange obsession with cooking Instagram accounts, and instructional videos – Japanese cooking if we want to be really specific. If I'm feeling stressed out, watching those sped up videos of someone cooking is very soothing for me.

"Then of course there are niche meme accounts, specifically those that are catered to Melbourne, or inner north Millennials. I feel both personally attacked and entertained all at once. Taking the piss out of yourself is certainly more healthy than comparing yourself to an influencer."

THE RISE OF ASMR: FROM UNBOXING AND DR PIMPLE POPPER TO DEEPTOK

The rise of niche, viral video content began on YouTube. Early versions that amassed millions of views online, rendering their creators oftentimes famous, included unboxing videos and the 'free hugs' guy (made famous by Sick Puppies' music video for "All The Same (Free Hugs)"), and morphed into the endlessly shared zit-squeezing of Dr Pimple Popper.

Today, we have embraced the ASMR element of accounts such as this; watching a dermatologist squeeze oozing pus out of impossibly large pimples in close up, slow motion. It sickens us, but we can't look away, due to the mesmerising crudeness of it all. So what exactly does such a video deliver to our brains to keep us so transfixed, despite monotony, repetition, and even disgust?

"ASMR videos have become very popular in recent years," says Dr Tracey Marks, US-based psychiatrist and one of YouTube's favourite mental health educators. "The research on it is still new, but it's developing.

"ASMR is a reflex response to a trigger, such as a sound or something you see. It's a tingling sensation... ASMR is relaxing and calming. At its most basic level, it's a way to engage your senses in a mindful experience."

Although Marks connects ASMR with minfulness, in some ways, ASMR videos online are the antithesis of the mindfulness movement. They seem to be defined moreso by mindlessness, if they can be defined at all. And recently, the internet has attempted to intellectualise ASMR content, taking it underground into some really weird spaces. Alt TikTok – a space for unconventional content beyond the choreographed videos on 'Straight TikTok' or 'StraightTok' – evolved into the darker DeepTok, a series of nonsensical video tableaux that has descended into a deeply weird void that spans everything from personified department stores to murderous Peppa Pig vignettes.

"THERE'S A VIBE OF SUPERIORITY HERE — REJECTING 'NORM' INFLUENCER CULTURE IN FAVOUR OF SOMETHING UNSETTLING OR ODD THAT CERTAINLY CAN NOT BE MONETISED."

Although DeepTok was a visceral response to not wanting to be part of the cringey dance trends of 'StraightTok', they are in themselves a clique – a select club, connected through a self-affirming sense of absurdist, sub-cultural elitism. There's a vibe of superiority here – rejecting 'norm' Influencer culture in favour of something unsettling or odd that certainly cannot be monetised.

If Tumblr and the rise of meme culture was Dadaist, then DeepTok is its successor, Surrealism. The Dada movement was marked by an anger-fuelled rejection of the world, its satirist creations made to incite feelings of rage or shock. It gave way to a softer, more positive form of surrealist expression, rooted less in cutting analysis, and more in kooky, dreamlike abstraction.

In the same way, TikTok's Berries and Cream trend (a reasonably non-ironic adoption of a dance from an absurdist Starburst commercial) was made purely for absurdist entertainment by poking fun at dance trends, whereas in the past Tumblr culture would have adopted it as cutting ironic commentary on capitalism.

It's one of the reasons that Millennials remain perplexed upon opening TikTok: How does one find the cutting commentary in Beans TikTok – a series of surrealist art videos about, well, beans? Or a community based around iStock pictures of speckled fruits, like speckled pear, and speckled mango?

"The creation and development of DeepTok sort of sums up the essence of Gen Z humour," says writer Kristin Merrilees. "It is purposefully meant to be lighthearted and surreal, often random and

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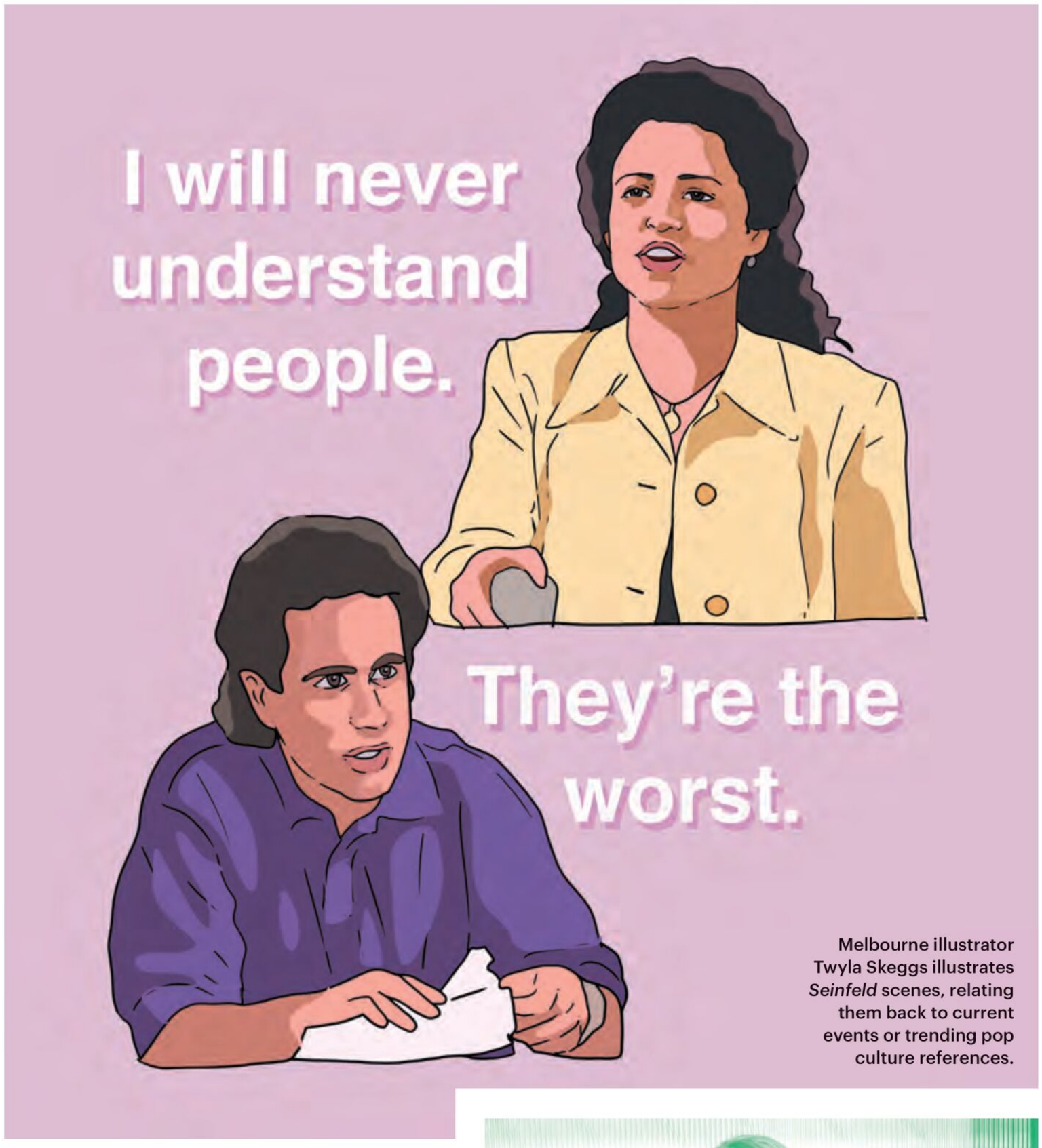


Melbourne illustrator Twyla Skeggs illustrates *Seinfeld* scenes, relating them back to current events or trending pop culture references.

ILLUSTRATION BY TWYLA SKEGGS

'quirky', and yet still nuanced and complex. Indeed, it is incredibly creative. It's sort of like deep-fried memes if they came to life."

As Merrilees points out, things just aren't that serious anymore. And Gen Z's DeepTok humour, often devoid of seriousness in favour of pure absurdity, is perhaps a response to how divided, and oftentimes scary, the online world has become.

The rise of the online culture wars have created intense, and oftentimes threatening spaces that viciously 'other' anyone outside of the strictly defined mainstream. As the world of the internet has become a place where the marginalised can be bullied 24/7, so content streams like AltTok and DeepTok have become a sanctuary, a place of escape. However, the elitism that comes with joining the DeepTok community – proliferated with how-tos that teach people to game the algorithm in order to be part of the subculture – can in itself become isolating for the very people it's meant to represent.

As user GoViolet told *Bustle* about the AltTok community, "the gatekeeping that happens occasionally when defining what's considered Alt [is concerning.] For

"It seems like niche content emanates the strongest these days," says Twyla Skeggs.

people who are Alternative, it's more than just a fashion statement. A good amount of people forget that politics are a crucial part of being Alternative."

Or as *Mashable* put it, in a recent op-ed about the parallels between Alt TikTok and Queer culture, "there's a sense of reclaiming what made them weird from those who were ostracised. The elitism comes from years of not being included."

That rush of community – the feeling that you've suddenly found 'your people' – can be both powerful and intoxicating, driving users to engage for longer and more often. YouTube personality Miller Wilson, who has amassed 1.35 million subscribers making survival and wilderness videos, tells me that this kind of weird content can be embracing, and even inspiring.

"I definitely come across some very extremely funny or weird content in the course of my week – and I guess I enjoy it for its pure, raw form of human expression. Some of it is supremely unique and very inspiring, and others are, at the very least, hilarious to observe and sometimes scary – in the same way as that weird uncle at the family wedding kind of way.

"But it takes all types to fill such a huge array of platforms, and you can weave yourself throughout a plethora of topics all day if you are not careful. In some ways this is the beauty of the online smorgasbord of social media personalities, from all walks of life – it's the weird and the wonderful."

THE WEIRD, THE WONDERFUL, AND THE ALGORITHM

If there is a commercial side to these profoundly unsellable videos, it is the social media conglomerates that make their money off the engagement of viral content. Advancing technologies and constantly tweaked algorithms rule the social media space, and as much as we'd like to imagine that our rousing originality results in virality, it is in fact the decision of a faceless computer.

There's something ironic about a subculture that rejects popularity, but in itself relies on it to proliferate. DeepTok and AltTok, of course, started as a subculture, but in some ways is more mainstream, and more viewed, than the now-tired dance trends that populate StraightTok. So, if the subculture becomes more popular than the culture it is rejecting, does that still make it a subculture?

Wilson knows the power of creating niche online video content first hand – and how quickly it can go viral if it connects with people.

"I grew up in a house in the rainforest on a creek in the mountains, and I spent all my childhood exploring nature and camping at the creek. I used to describe all my adventures to my friends, and they said I should film it to show them. So I uploaded a few videos to YouTube, and then one went viral straight away really. And that set me off on what is now a seven year journey – I now do it as a full time job."

"My second or third YouTube video was of me catching a huge eel down the creek and it went viral. A week later I was contacted by the US production crew of a Ellen Degeneres / Steve Harvey produced show called *Little Big Shots*. Within a few weeks they had flown me over to Los Angeles for 10 days to record an episode for the series.

"My very next video was me delivering 12 baby stingrays, which now has over 20 Million views and really set up my channel to get over 1 million subscribers and 150 million views."

So what does it take to go viral these days? I spoke to Luke Grigis, CEO of The Brag Media, and manager of YouTube sensation and inventor Simone Giertz (2.6 million subs) and Brisbane-based comedian Christian Hull. He believes the growth in uber niche content areas is twofold: based in both rapidly advancing algorithms, and TikTok's groundbreaking digital strategy, focused not on appeasing advertisers, but rather on serving you quickfire content.

"If you think about the genius of the TikTok platform, it has zero friction in terms of serving out content – you don't need to follow anyone, you don't even need to have an account. You open the app and content instantly hits your feed. That's never really happened before.

"TikTok gets a lot of data, every five seconds. So their ability to understand very quickly what a certain community is liking in a certain area of the world... it's better than anyone else has ever done in human history."

The combination of the platform's instant gratification – the second you open it, it's already serving you its best content based on your demographics and the huge bank of data it has accumulated in the background – and its ability to seek out niche communities that might interest you with pinpoint accuracy, means it's a bubbling crucible of oddball content that can reach exactly the right people at exactly the right time.

It solves the internet's most frustrating problem: that because there is so much content on offer, we end up spending most of our lives online looking for it, coming away mostly unsatisfied. We spend a gobsmacking 187 hours out of our year mindlessly scrolling Netflix alone for something to watch, so it's really no wonder that TikTok's brilliant strategy – removing the onus away from the user to find content they're interested in, and instead just showing them – has paid off.

"The internet," Grigis tells me, "has basically allowed anyone with some random, obscure, niche interest – like watching pimples get popped, or guessing paint colours – to find the million other people in the world that are interested in that as well.

"Is culture shaped by this content, or is content shaping this culture? It's probably both. This stuff would have always been out there in the world, it just needed the technology to connect people."

BLURRING THE LINES: WHERE IS THE INTERNET HEADING?

There's no question that the internet has changed dramatically since the early days – and social media platforms are no different. Huge advances in technology, paired with an increasingly sophisticated understanding of how humans interact on the internet, has fundamentally altered not only the way in which we use the internet, but how we interact in our offline lives as well.

The advent of AI technology has given rise to viral AI-generated content – like the hilarious TV 'episodes' produced by robots that are fed scripts from popular shows like *Seinfeld* and *Friends* – as well as the launch of Instagram's first ever 'virtual influencer' in Miquela. So is this where content is headed? A blurring of the lines between our real and virtual selves?

Miller Wilson has amassed 1.35 million subscribers making survival and wilderness videos.

YouTube personality Miller Wilson.

"EVERYONE IS IN SOME WAY OR ANOTHER LIVING OUT A PORTION OF THEIR LIFE ONLINE NOW."

"Everyone is in some way or another living out a portion of their life online now," says YouTube personality Miller Wilson, "whether they are forging a career or just searching for the portrayal of their best self.

"Obviously with the expansion of the meta world and the opportunities for people to completely immerse themselves in a reality of their own creation... I think more and more people will disappear into a dreamscape, which I am a little scared to think about the societal consequences of, to be honest. Maybe the next generation will lose touch with the real human life experiences."

Wilson speaks, perhaps, to the decline of celebrity-style influencers, modelling themselves on supposed 'real life' monotony – and branding those experiences every step of the way. As more and more people discover their own creative outlets on less intimidating, less glossy platforms like TikTok, it follows that social media content will broaden into some of the most uncharted corners of the internet.

"You'll get creators who will get more and more niche, and are enormously famous," says The Brag Media's Luke Grigis, "with millions of followers, making millions of dollars – that most people haven't heard of. Back in the day, you had Madonna, you had Elvis, you had Prince – whereas now you have 'real' celebrities out there who are proper famous, but only famous to the people that love them and follow them. They're not famous outside of their niche. It's only going to become more prevalent."

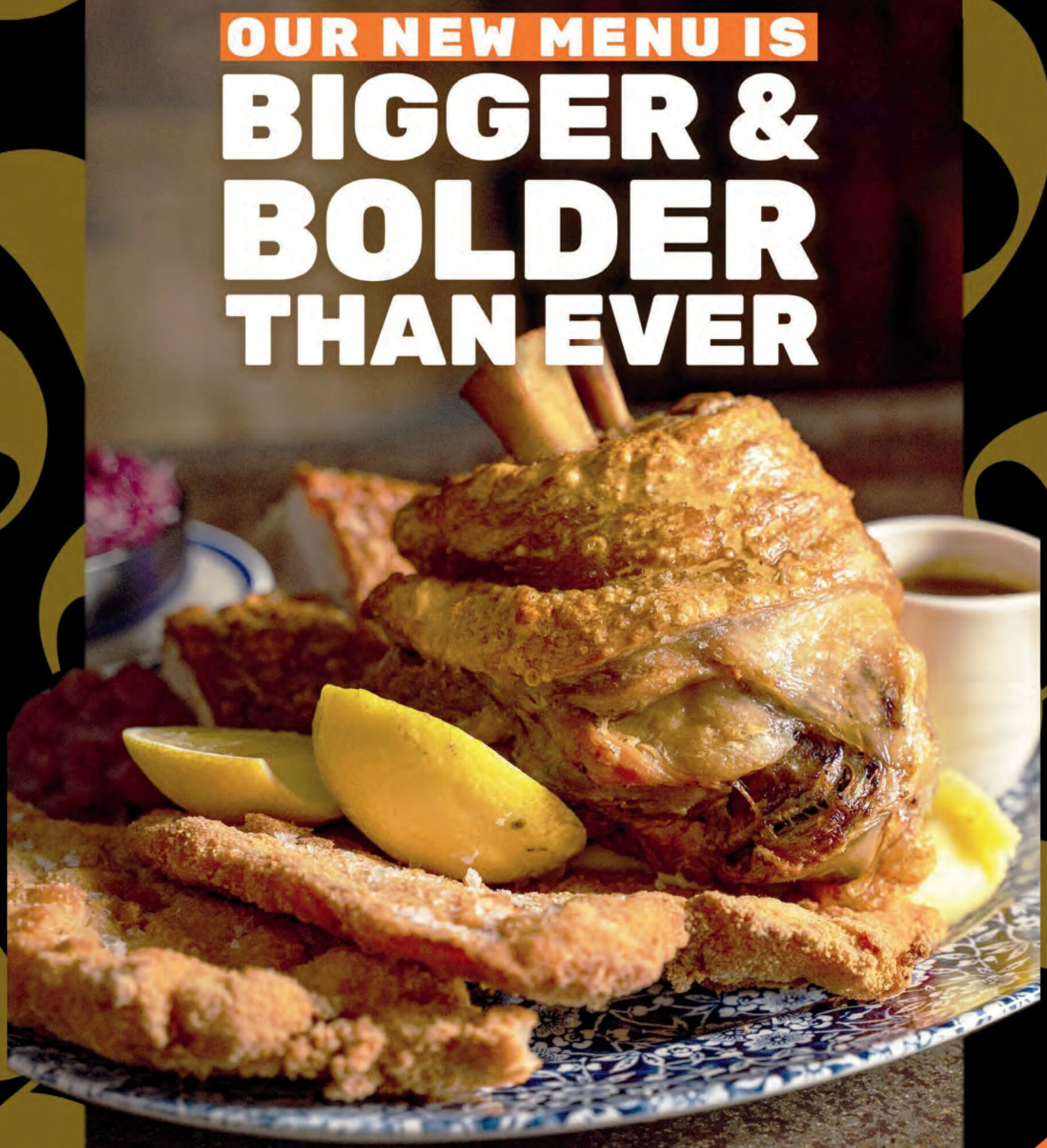
Illustrator Twyla Skeggs, meanwhile, is more optimistic than Miller, and tells me she thinks we're headed backwards to a more lo-fi depiction of our online personas, rather than propelling ever-forwards, losing ourselves in the virtual, dreamlike dystopia of DeepTok.

"It's very hard to predict, but if trends are cyclical then maybe we're heading towards a MySpace renaissance? Gen Z have changed the face of social media by being both earnest, and having a flair for choreographed TikTok dances.

"We've come a long way from adding song lyrics to your MSN chat handle."Everyone is in some way or another living out a portion of their life online now." ®

OUR NEW MENU IS

BIGGER & BOLDER THAN EVER



COOKED FROM SCRATCH
WITH LOVE FROM GERMANY

THE BAVARIAN

How Bank Australia's Grants Program is Fostering Positive Change

Bank Australia is not only committed to achieving net-zero emissions by 2035, they are also supporting projects that contribute to equality and justice across Australia.

By **Augustus Welby**

Bank Australia takes a progressive approach to banking. The customer-owned bank devotes up to 4% of its annual after-tax profit to the Impact Fund, which is the source of its Community Customer Grants. The grants are awarded once a year to a range of customer organisations, such as not-for-profits, schools, community groups and social enterprises, who're committed to creating positive change.

The recipients of Bank Australia's 2022 Community Customer Grants are working to create change in a variety of significant areas, including addressing climate change, supporting asylum seekers, and advocating for diversity and inclusion. All are deserving recipients, but there are three grantees who particularly caught our attention.

Women of Colour Australia

Women of Colour Australia founder Brenda Gaddi is a first-generation Filipino Australian who lives and works on Wallumettagal land in northern Sydney. For the last dozen years, Brenda has been devoted to building women-focused communities and championing women's voices.

Brenda set up the not-for-profit organisation Women of Colour Australia (WoCA) in 2020, following the death of her mother, Electa. WoCA seeks to advance the lives of Australia's women of colour through education programs, community support initiatives, and anti-racist and gender equity advocacy.

The WoCA board is made up of women from diverse backgrounds who stand in solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. In its short history, the organisation has secured a contract with the Victorian Government to fund its pilot Executive Leadership Program and has been recognised as a Strategy Leader by the Australian Human Rights Commission in the refresh of the National Anti-Racism Framework.

Ocean Impact Organisation

There's no such thing as a healthy planet without healthy oceans. In recent history, factors such as overfishing, pollution, habitat destruction and human-made climate change have combined to detrimentally impact ocean health.

The Sydney-based Ocean Impact Organisation (OIO) endeavours to transform ocean health. Founders Nick Chiarelli and Tim Silverwood launched OIO in 2020 as a "solutions focussed" enterprise—i.e., OIO is willing to work with a broad range of industries, disciplines and technologies to preserve, regenerate and restore ocean ecosystems.

OIO is supporting startups working on a range of challenges impacting ocean health including: climate change; waste management and packaging; ecosystem protection; fishing and aquaculture; renewable ocean energy; decarbonising ocean transport; ocean monitoring; seaweed farming; underwater robotics and many more.

Balaangala Community Group Inc.

Present-day Brisbane is home to the Turrbal and Jagera people, who, prior to colonisation, referred to the region as Meanjin. Balaangala Community Group is based in The Gap, a suburb in Brisbane's north-west, and the organisation has deep roots in the community.

Balaangala brings together First Nations and non-First Nations people through a program of formal and informal events, many of which take place in the group's dedicated garden place which is filled with native plants used by First Nations people for food, fibre, medicine and tools.

Balaangala's efforts are centred on caring for Country and creating a safe place for self-reflection, discussion, learning and collaboration.

In partnership with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the group looks to combat injustice and racism by providing opportunities for non-First Nations people to learn the whole truth of our shared history. Some of the group's activities are an annual Sorry Day ceremony, Invasion Day commemoration, schools education program and the establishment of a Pay the Rent Fund where non-First Nations people contribute to a fund which is distributed annually to groups that are 100% owned/run by First Nations people.

Bank Australia's next grants round will open in March 2023. Applicants must be organisations who opened a Bank Australia account or loan prior to 30th June 2022. The grants are awarded to projects having a positive impact in areas regarded as important by Bank Australia customers. These include diversity and inclusion, environmental conservation, animal welfare, supporting refugees and people seeking asylum, and addressing climate change and family violence.

Bank Australia

IMAGES SUPPLIED BY GRANTEES VIA BANK AUSTRALIA

National Affairs

Climate of Fear: How Inaction is Taking a Toll

By VIVIENNE KELLY

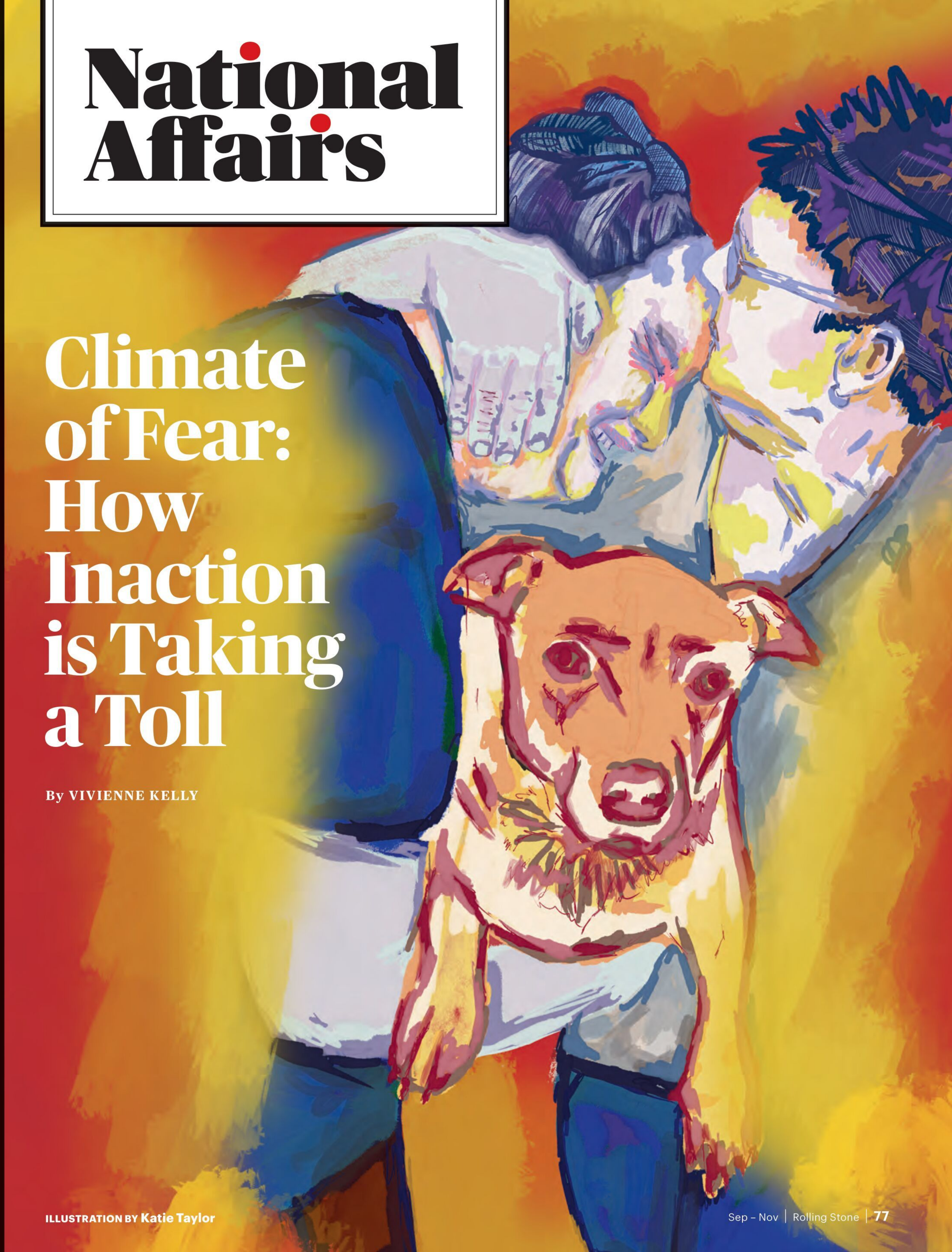


ILLUSTRATION BY Katie Taylor

THE SOUND of rain, once regarded as a calming and comforting pitter patter to wind down and fall asleep to, is – anecdotally at least – causing more of us to panic and tense up under the covers.

Perhaps you remember "Bailey's Barometer – business of the brolly, predicted precipitation, drips and drops across rooftops and crops". Those iconic words were burned into the memories of many TV-viewing kids of the Nineties and early Noughties and gave us a giggle at the thought of water falling from the sky in such a rhythmic and melodic way. We'd shout it in schoolyards. Say it along with Channel 10's weather presenter Tim Bailey as, for reasons far less serious than now, we pretended we needed to know how much rain there would be tomorrow.

Another cultural reference point for rain in the Nineties – or lack thereof – was randomly screaming "Marge, the rains are 'ere" at any given opportunity, whether it was as someone was eating corn, when it was raining, or if you sighted a packet of frozen food from McCain.

If none of that made sense to you, the simplest explanation (without delving into a study of outdated Australian cultural weather references), is to say that for many of us, rain and weather patterns were nothing but a quizzical, sometimes amusing, sometimes annoying, phenomenon which affected our day in minimal and minuscule ways.

It didn't really happen to us, just around us.

Fast forward a couple of decades to 2022 and the size, scale and severity of the rain is anything but quizzical, amusing, minimal or minuscule.

In 2022 alone, so many rain records have been broken up and down the east coast, that each new precedent barely gets its time in the sun – or the shade.

Now as the rain drops across rooftops, it's hard to switch your brain off from thinking about your friends in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales potentially going underwater once more, devastating beach erosion up and down the east coast, the farmers who will have more crops wiped out and the associated supply chain and cost of living issues, or even your own mundane mould issues. The windows are rattling and the water falling from the sky almost feels like an invading force, determined to destroy, destruct and devastate.

Sure, in the Nineties there were catastrophic weather events – drought, cyclone, fires, floods and everything in between. In 2022, however, every pattern of weather feels more dramatic, more significant. We are weighed down by the implication that this is as bad as it has ever been – the worst fires, the worst floods, unprecedented rainfall, record-breaking heat waves, a weather pattern or phenomenon that used to barely happen, now occurring so often it's redundant to say "once in a lifetime".

And yet, as bad as it is, we're also conscious this could well be as good as it gets.

The general consensus is: it's only going to get worse.

And so we have created, and are now stuck in, a climate of fear.

Fear and Loathing

WHEN THE fires raged across the country in the summer of 2019 and 2020, Australian musician Sheona Urquhart Smångs was living in Sweden with her Swedish husband.

The images of death and destruction here – headline news in a country over fifteen-thousand kilometres from her native Melbourne – caused her panic and pain.

She sat at her piano in despair, her heart aching for her rugged home which was burning as politicians and power brokers kept their head in the sand (or their feet on the crisp white sands of Hawaii).

Well-meaning Swedes who were seeing the images on the nightly news and knew Sheona's family lived in regional Victoria simply assumed her family had lost everything. And while this wasn't the case for Sheona's family, it was for many others.

She was also exposed to wild fires in Sweden on a scale the country – usually on the colder side of the climate – wasn't quite ready for back in 2018.

"A lot of forest was wiped out and, you know, Sweden doesn't have water bombers or [the necessary] aircraft. So Sweden was ringing up Italy, ringing up Poland: Can we have your helicopters?"

She says locals also despair that a white Christmas has gone from being a lifetime guarantee in frosty Sweden to a spectacle that comes around every now and then.

It was Australia's struggles that prompted her to sit down and write.

"You sing when simply speaking is not enough. You write a song when simply talking about it is not enough. You're levelling up your thoughts in a way, in a message that hopefully can be conveyed. I think that's why artists [lend their voice to these causes]. I think we're compelled to," she says.

"I think that's what music does – what the arts does – is it helps articulate how we feel."

So, she articulated how she felt.

"Escape the crying and the falling eucalyptus trees.
"We've made our nature mad and she's bringing us to our knees.
"Our horizon stolen, swallowed by a poison cloud.
"But it's hard to hear our pleas, if heads are planted in the ground."

These lyrics form part of Sheona's emotional song "My Rugged Home" which she created with Jade Ell as part of their Ell and Hart music project.

"People were freaking out over here, so it felt like I couldn't really escape it from here either," she tells *Rolling Stone*.

"Fire is a really humbling element because you're very powerless to it, even when you're fighting it. You don't really fight fire, you just contain it and try to let it do its thing. So it makes you feel very powerless.

"I started getting this feeling of extraordinary powerlessness from here... I was just feeling incredibly sad, but then I felt incredibly disappointed in how our government was handling it. I felt incredibly disappointed. Really pissed off. And so it was a combination of feeling incredibly sad and feeling incredibly angry. [So the song became] just like a mantra of: What are we going to do? What are we doing? It doesn't feel like we're doing anything."

A Fantastic Fear of Everything

THIS ANGER and frustration can be hard to escape, as can the fear.

Fear can be weaponised against people, with accusations frequently levied at politicians and the media that they're doing just that. But fear can be a weapon in your own mind – invasive, destructive, unavoidable and hard to contain. It feels like a war we're losing.

And this internalised fear, largely from inaction and a sense of hopelessness, is taking a toll on more than just Sheona.

Dr. Beth Hill, an anthropologist, facilitator and writer, has researched the psychological and cultural dimensions of climate change and now designs and facilitates workshops for those "coming to terms with the complex alchemy of hope and despair in these times of climate crisis" with the organisation Psychology For A Safe Climate.

She regularly works with those working in, and campaigning for, the climate space and sees everything from burnout to grief, guilt and despair – the full gamut of complex climate emotions.

"It's a complicated one because obviously there is a lot of urgency about taking action and it's easy to drive ourselves into the ground thinking that unless we all do everything we can right now [then] the crisis won't be averted," she tells *Rolling Stone*.

"Usually what we recommend people do is become aware of their own red flags about when they are burning out, and that tends to be when you're not talking to any of your friends on the phone or catching up with anyone socially. You're sleeping badly or you can't get out of bed.

JEREMY BEZANGER, UNSPLASH

VIVIENNE KELLY *is a freelance music, entertainment and business writer, living and working on Gadigal land in Sydney.*

BUSHFIRES BELOW STACKS BLUFF, TASMANIA, AUSTRALIA. MATT PALMER, UNSPLASH

You're spending a lot of time in constant distraction, so if you're not working you're on Netflix or on social media [constantly]. Everyone has different signs...

"And then usually what we advise is taking a break from the news. [...] We don't necessarily need to read every single bad article, every brief, to stay across what's happening. There's a place for being informed, but doing it intentionally and exposing yourself to media in an intentional way, if that's possible."

Dr. Hill says mindful self-compassion is also important – that is recognising the difficulties and struggles you're facing and being present, aware and caring of the complex toll that can take, including when it comes to planning for the future.

Beyond the fear and anxiety, climate distress – as Dr. Hill calls it – can cause people to reassess everything from where they work to whether or not to have children.

Cassie Jenkins recently switched from a career in hospitality to one more closely linked to the outdoors, describing herself as an "almost horticulturist".

She now works for InvertiGro, a vertical farming start-up that aims to create sustainable and reliable production of fresh and healthy produce.

Her first foray into the world of plants, however, was less sustainable.

"I guess when you think about gardening and gardening companies and things like that, you think about nature and improving the environment – and a lot of companies do that.

"But I just thought it was a big joke that we go and landscape someone's garden or clean it up, and then we just get a skip bin and all the soil, leaf litter, all the pots that have come with all the plants all get chucked in there, all the rubbish – nothing gets sorted properly. And then it all just goes to the tip.

"We've made our nature mad and she's bringing us to our knees."

"And it's just like, we're out here improving people's immediate environments in their gardens, but we're not actually helping the greater environment at all. Towards the end of my time there, I was like, I really don't like how we're not sorting this out properly. We're not recycling, we're just creating more waste and it doesn't have to be that way."

On the hunt for her next employment opportunity, she sought out a company with greener credentials and higher levels of innovation and integration with the environment it relies on.

She accepted the job with InvertiGro because she wanted her life, overall, to be greener and cleaner.

Rommel Hérnandez, a paramedic living in Melbourne, tries to make similarly conscious decisions, although with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, he became even more aware of just how much single-use plastic and chemicals were being called upon to keep people as safe and healthy as possible.

In a choice between health and waste, health ultimately won, but these things do play on his mind.

He's also conscious that his relatively privileged individual economic situation enables him to make informed decisions about cutting down waste and his carbon footprint.

He is acutely aware that not everyone has that luxury.

"It's just really odd for me, because I am a migrant and my background is Filipino. I grew up there for fifteen years, and [sustainability] was not really the main focus. I grew up in such a poor country and then coming here with my family, and how they were raised, they're just much more focussed on [financial security].

DAMAGE TO FARM PROPERTY AFTER BUSHFIRE, GRAMPIANS VIC, AUSTRALIA. CHRISTIAN BASS, UNSPLASH

"So it's a really hard balance for me."

He also acknowledges that, for many people, purchasing more sustainable products is beyond their budget, and many cheaper alternatives are wrapped in excess plastic and other things that ultimately end up in landfill.

With all this in mind, his wish is that the government, and those with the power and resources to do something about it, actually do it – so that economically disadvantaged people don't bear the brunt of both the responsibility and the consequences.

He used the recent Federal Election to send his message, believing that's one of the most effective ways for privileged people to act.

Will politicians actually do anything though?

In the poignant and pained words of Sheona in "My Rugged Home": *"Who fell asleep at the wheel?"*

Turning Fear into Hope

ALLEGRA SPENDER, the recently elected independent member for the federal seat of Wentworth in Sydney's affluent eastern suburbs, believes those behind the wheel might just be waking up.

She says the 'teal' independents have a mandate to not only wake them up, but also course correct and drive them forward because it's what the community wants.

"I think there is a lot of anxiety, but actually, particularly after the election, I've seen a great deal of hopefulness," she says. "There is a lot of anxiety about climate change, but then there's a lot of anxiety when you see something happening and you don't feel you have any control over it – and I think that has been what has been driving a great deal of anxiety because people want to take action on the things they care about.

"If you don't have some measure of fear and grief about the state of the world, you're probably not really paying attention."

"And when they can take action, anxiety actually lessens and your connection to community increases."

This community connection is something else Dr. Hill recommends for people feeling overwhelmed by the scale of the problem facing us.

"If you don't have some measure of fear and grief about the state of the world, you're probably not really paying attention," she acknowledges, but stresses there is also room for hope.

"We really try to support people to connect with each other and with other people when they are feeling that way. That's one of the key aspects that both helps with climate grief, but also with burnout because rediscovering that sense of belonging and connection [is really important]."

Despite the dire predictions, reports, and the sense that we're languishing in a constant state of inaction from leaders, Dr. Hill says community will be key, as will all of these strong emotions we're grappling with.

Indeed, even the scale of the grief, despair, confusion, loss, frustration and anger on display should give you hope. All of those emotions stem from people's passion – their love of the planet and their sheer fight or flight desire to save it.

"I find my hope in the work I do because I'm engaging with people every day who love and care so much about this planet and their community and the people living on this planet, and the animals – that they're feeling these big emotions," Dr. Hill says.

"The depth of sadness is really a reflection of the depth of love, and the depth of anger is usually a reflection of people's passion for justice.

"So I feel a lot of hope when I actually talk to people who are engaging with this issue and are concerned about it, because I feel like that's where the solution is going to lie, is coming alive with each other and being able to really connect with what matters most."

National Affairs

THE OIL AND GAS INDUSTRY *REFUSES* TO DIE.

By **ROYCE KURMELOVS**

Australia's oil and gas companies gathered in Brisbane for their annual conference and the message was clear: they will keep pumping the gas.

SHUTTERSTOCK

N EERIE blue light washed the Brisbane Convention Centre ballroom: blue for petroleum, blue for burning gas, blue for blue hydrogen.

It was Wednesday evening in middle-May 2022, day three of the oil and gas industry's four-day national conference – not counting the golf tournament scheduled for that Friday. The annual Gala dinner was about to begin. The absolute cream of the industry began to gather about an hour before doors opened, forming an impenetrable wall of blue and grey suits in the foyer as they knocked back drinks and developed their professional networks.

Earlier that day, the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association (APPEA) media rep had handed me a free ticket saying it was supposed to be a hell of a show. I had flown in 48 hours before to cover the conference. In that time I had been shamed by protesters when entering the building, enjoyed the free lunches in the exhibition hall and browsed the stalls showing off the industry's best efforts to suck more fossil fuels from the earth's crust.

Now I was being invited to drink their wine.

It was a casual bit of sleaze, clearly another part of the industry association's broader media management strategy that included a dedicated media room – sponsored by Santos, the Asia-Pacific's largest oil company – complete with light pastries, coffee, Santos-branded merchandise, and free cocktails, where the Santos execs could mingle with the nation's financial press.

Ordinarily tickets to the dinner ran a punter $195 – more than oil companies like Chevron paid in tax over the last seven years. This came on top of the $1,845 APPEA members paid for standard general entry tickets to the four-day conference, or the $2,295 for everybody else.

Those who could afford the golden ticket bought themselves unfettered access to the very nexus of wealth and power in Australia, the point in the Venn Diagram where government and industry overlap. On this night alone, those present included representatives from some of the biggest oil and gas companies in the world – those like Exxon, Chevron, Shell – the smaller players, public relations professionals, departmental bureaucrats and elected officials.

At 7pm doors for the sold-out, 85-table event opened and people began to stream into a room that looked like a scene from Bladerunner. Through a blue haze, the words "Together We Shine" – the theme of the dinner and a reference to the song "Shine" by Vanessa Amorosi – were beamed onto two separate screens above the main stage.

It was an unfortunate programming choice. Amorosi had written the song as a teenager and originally titled it "Die" but her production team thought it too dark and it was later changed to "Shine". The original lyrics read: *"Nothing lasts forever/but you can try/look around you/everyone you see/everyone you know/is gonna die."*

Once seated, wine flowed and filet mignon hit the tables as Ian Davies, APPEA chair and Senex CEO began his speech by telling his audience how the world "looks a bit different" to when he last addressed the dinner in 2019.

"Through thick and thin, Queensland's oil and gas industry has persevered," Davies said. "In our industry, as in life, the *how* you do something is just as important as what you've achieved."

After the platitudes came the awards. To assist in handing out the trophies for environmental and safety excellence that the industry had given itself, the outgoing head of the National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority (NOPSEMA), Stuart Smith was called to the stage.

NOPSEMA is the industry regulator and in theory is meant to be the cop on the beat, ensuring these companies play by the rules. When the ceremony was over, Davies heaped praise on Smith and encouraged the audience to applaud him for his eight-year service.

Later, when reporting the story, I asked NOPSEMA why they allowed this spectacle. In a statement they explained they had no issue with Smith appearing on stage during an industry dinner as his contract was up in September. The event offered an opportunity for his "work over the last eight years [to] be acknowledged," they said.

But that was not all. There would still be one more surprise to come when, after the crowd was nicely toasted, the entertainment for the evening was announced: a private show by Vanessa Amorosi herself.

COOKING WITH GAS

AT THIS POINT in human history it is hard not to conclude the oil and gas industry is taking the piss.

It took 252 million years for the planet's oil fields to form. Over hundreds of millions of years, plankton, plants, algae and bacteria fell to the bottom of a vast ocean where their bodies became trapped, pressed and cooked by geological processes, working over timescales impossible for the human imagination to grasp.

As they liquified, they transformed into raw crude and the carbon they had consumed in life was buried away for an eternity. Around four thousand years ago, the ancient Greeks wrote of oil springs and began using the stuff to make asphalt while the ancient Chinese became the first to use it for fuel.

At this point in human history it is hard not to conclude the oil and gas industry is taking the piss.

The first modern oil well was drilled in Titusville, Pennsylvania in 1859 and over the two centuries of organised extraction that followed, humanity has been steadily releasing all that carbon back into the atmosphere.

No one is sure just how much oil humanity has consumed to date – estimates vary wildly from the hundreds of billions of barrels to over a trillion – but burning fossil fuels today accounts for eighty-six percent of the world's energy and around seventy-five percent of current anthropogenic CO2 emissions that are destabilising the climate.

Fixing this means the oil and gas industry needs to die.

In April this year the International Panel on Climate Change declared it was "now or never" to address climate change, an act that required moving away from burning fossil fuels. In 2021, the International Energy Agency – a deeply conservative institution feted by Ronald Reagan – said limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees, as set out in the Paris agreement, meant there could be no new oil, gas or coal investment beyond the end of that year.

To date the world has warmed an average of 1.2C and Australia is already reeling. During the Black Summer Bushfires, 8.5 hectares burned across three states. This was followed by torrential rain that began to fall over Brisbane in 2022 and did not stop. By the time it was over, a muddy swathe of landmass from southeast Queensland down into northern New South Wales was underwater. Lismore, home to 27,000 people, was temporarily wiped from the map – not once but twice.

Yet Australia remains determined to keep pumping the gas. The country may be the twentieth largest oil exporter but it vies with Qatar for status as the world's top producer of natural gas. As of December 2021, Australia was said to be considering at least 116 new fossil fuel projects for approval and, according to a report by the Global Energy Monitor, had at least six hundred kilometers of new oil and gas pipelines under construction.

Even before the ecological consequences are felt in full, these decisions could spark a financial crisis that makes the GFC look like a bank error. An analysis published in the scientific journal Nature in May found over USD$1 trillion in oil

ROYCE KURMELOVS *is an Australian journalist and author of four books including* The Death of Holden *and* Just Money.

► Ordinarily tickets to the dinner ran a punter $195 — more than oil companies like Chevron paid in tax over the last seven years.

◄ The APPEA conference ran days out from the 2022 federal election.

ROYCE KURMELOVS

production assets are at risk of becoming stranded as the world transitions away from fossil fuels – and the majority of them are owned by pension and superannuation funds in OECD countries.

In other words, as humanity moves away from fossil fuels, those who are of working age now will be left holding the bag.

WHO'S WHO OF STATE CAPTURE

THE MARKETING COPY described the conference program as "three days of candid debate on how the oil and gas sector can play a central role in Australia's future" including a "star studded election panel" on the first day.

At a time when, for most people, writing a letter to their local MP would be met with a form response outlining the party's policy platform and a promise to "look into it", it was a testament to the industry's wealth and influence that attendees heard from a dizzying number of current and former political leaders.

Just attempting to list them felt like trying to draw a corporate chart of the Australian government. They included former Coalition resources minister Keith Pitt, future Labor resources minister Madeline King, and former foreign ministers Julie Bishop and Stephen Smith.

Norwegian ambassador Paul Gulleik Larsen was present for the opening of the conference, while several notable figures attended the gala dinner. In addition to NOPSEMA's Stuart Smith, there was Queensland Liberal National Party MPs Pat Weir and Trevor Watts, and the Labor MP James Madden who had all been in attendance.

Western Australian deputy premier Roger Cook flew in to attend the gala dinner ahead of a panel on the final day and Queensland premier Annastacia Palaszczuk was supposed to give an address but ended up having her minister for resources, Scott Stewart fill in.

Even Greens leader Adam Bandt made an appearance – to address protesters outside the conference centre.

For the most part these protesters were ignored and mocked. The dirtiest word in the Australian corporate world is "activist" which loosely translates to "not a serious person" – and the oil and gas industry only deals with serious people. Up on the main stage it sought to project an image of itself as bold, certain and in control of its future.

Away from the glitz of the stage lights and the television cameras, the technical presentations offered better clarity about what they were really thinking about.

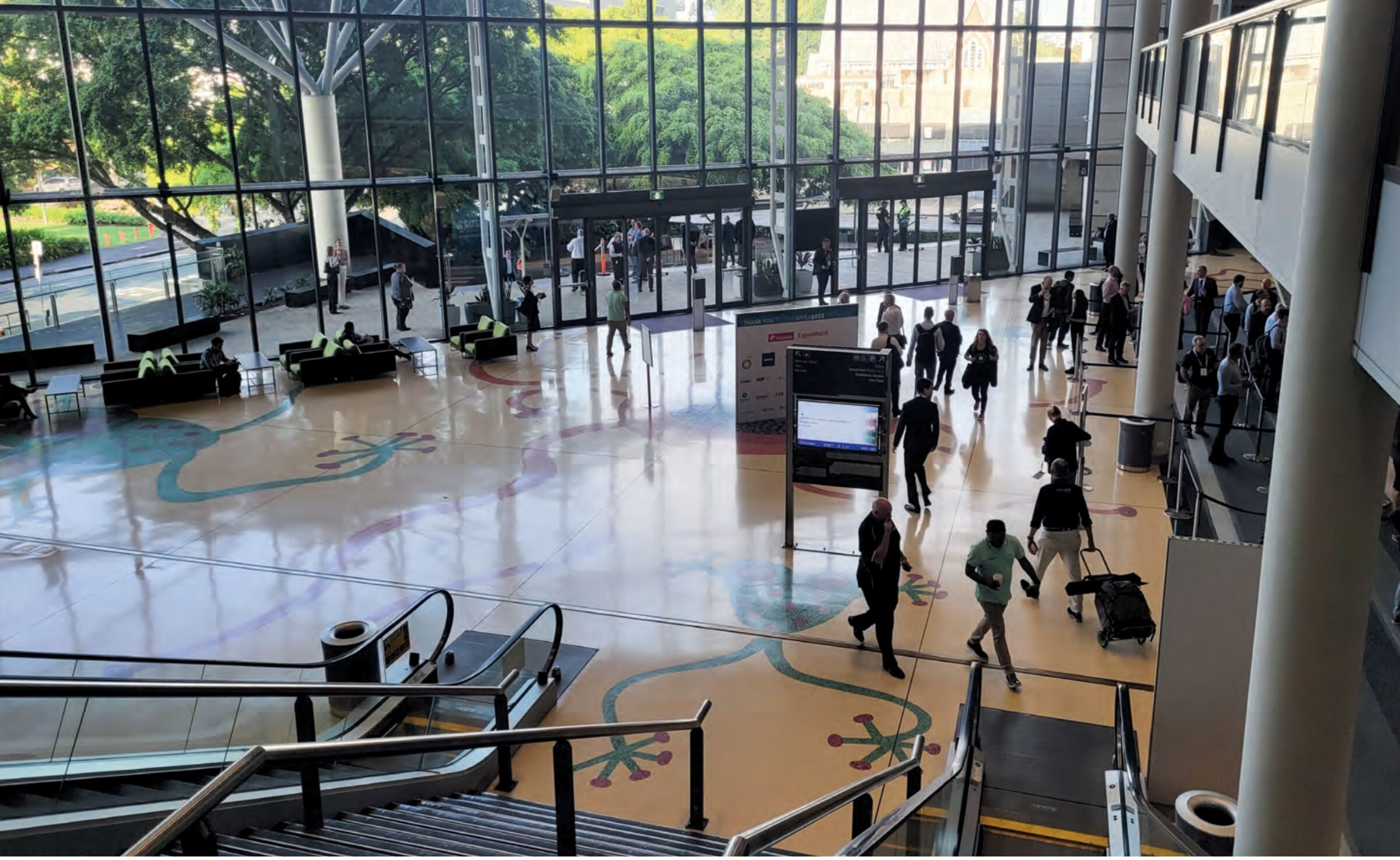
They ran four at a time in smaller meeting rooms and covered everything from highly technical discussions about the latest drilling techniques to talks about the future of hydrogen and decommissioning old oil assets – a hot issue for an industry confronting the prospect of its demise.

Even Greens leader Adam Bandt made an appearance — to address protesters outside the conference centre.

One talk offered suggestions for how companies may better attract millennials into their workforce. Another discussed the latest research on handling addiction and suicide among oil rig workers – around 190 mining, construction and energy workers die by suicide a year.

There were also two separate presentations covering the legal risks associated with climate change. Neither were well attended.

The second of these was delivered by Anne Freeman, partner with Piper Alderman lawyers, who offered some "practical tips" about what oil companies should do if – or when – they were hit with a class action lawsuit related to climate change.



Her suggestions included “get to know your opponent” to understand how the lawsuit was being funded and “get to know your judge” to “learn a bit about how they’ve previously dealt with class actions”. Freeman then concluded by warning her audience “we’re going to see more of these actions.”

She’s not wrong. According to the Melbourne Climate Futures database recording current and historical climate litigation in Australia, there have been 290 lawsuits to date – the second highest next to the US.

Following her talk, Freeman was asked by a member of the audience on whether she thought it was “inevitable that oil and gas becomes the next tobacco” and if so, what she would suggest to stop that from happening.

“We've already started to see it,” she said before advising those listening to do their homework, get organised and be prepared.

WHAT WAR’S GOOD FOR

APPEA CHAIR IAN Davies was so good at his job that by the end of his opening address I almost felt an urge to run out and buy shares in Exxon. The existential threat of climate change may be the single greatest issue facing the human species but all he really wanted to talk about was Ukraine.

“We are now in the middle of an energy crisis ignited by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,” Davies said. “But this is a crisis that has been building for much of the last decade through underinvestment in new and diverse [oil and gas] supply sources.

“The crisis may have started in Europe, [but] the ramifications are increasingly global.”

The thing about spin is that it works by volume. It doesn’t matter if you don’t believe it, what matters is there’s a lot of it and that it’s everywhere. At some point even the most outrageous talking points begin to make a sort of intuitive sense.

Davies had borrowed this particular set of talking points from a campaign being run by his counterparts in the US, the American Petroleum Institute (API) to justify the continued existence of the oil and gas industry. The goal was to head off climate action by weaponising a war in order to sell more gas.

Up until the moment Russian tanks rolled on Kyiv on 24 February 2022 to pursue regime change in Ukraine, financing for new fossil fuel projects had been drying up and governments were starting to make noises about actually beginning the transition away from fossil fuels.

Christine Arena is a former executive vice president of Edelmann, the preferred public relations firm for the world’s biggest fossil fuel companies, who in 2015 resigned in protest over the firm’s continuing work for oil and gas. She says the first rumblings of an effort to link fossil fuels with national security in the public imagination began a day before the invasion began.

“The American Petroleum Institute, which is effectively the fossil fuel industry's biggest lobbying arm, released these talking points, and they weren't ordinary talking points,” Arena said. “They were a list of demands.”

An analysis by InfluenceMap, a UK-based think tank which tracks fossil fuel company lobbying, followed what happened next: within hours of the invasion getting underway, the world’s biggest oil companies declared open season on climate action.

Within days they were everywhere. Advertisements published on social media by an API “auxiliary” group carried slogans like “American Made Energy” and were seen by one-in-ten Facebook users in the US. API CEO Mike Sommers averaged at least one interview a day over the first two weeks of March – at one point making six appearances on Fox News in a single day.

Arena says these sorts of coordinated campaigns typically take months of planning. Talking points need to be refined, distributed and drilled; videos need to be shot and edited; art for print and social media advertisements need to be designed; and then every detail of the campaign needs to be approved at the highest levels.

She believes the industry was prepared for an escalation of the conflict and were determined to make US President Joe Biden personally own any ensuing price spike.

“This was the industry with a gun to Joe Biden's head,” she said. “They were saying: we're gonna blame these high gas prices on you. We’re going to press for oil and gas expansion and we're going to attack renewables. As those oil prices come up, we're going to continue to pin the blame on you.”

There have been 290 climate-related lawsuits to date in Australia — the second highest behind the US.

With the APPEA conference running days out from the 2022 federal election, where a group of independent candidates were explicitly running on platforms calling for more climate action, Davies threw down the gauntlet.

"The focus of our opponents on stopping fossil fuel projects, frankly, has had no effect on consumer demand. It has had no effect on emissions reduction," he said. "What it has done is pushed fossil fuel developments to places such as the Middle East and Russia."

It was an idea that would be repeated in panels discussing what the invasion of Ukraine would do to oil and gas markets, and in presentations like the one given by Santos CEO Kevin Gallagher during a plenary on "the shape of things to come".

Gallagher, a short man with a broad Scottish brogue, began his talk on day two with a series of tall claims: Australia needed "decarbonisation, not defossilisation"; the world will still be using oil and gas long into the future; there were "simply no alternatives today" to replace fossil fuels used in fertilisers, steel, cement and plastics; and the world needed steady supplies of oil and gas now that Russia had invaded Ukraine.

The "scarcity" of new oil and gas developments was "frightening", Gallagher said, before warning darkly of "tight supply for some years."

"Energy security is the foundation of national security," he said. "What we have on our doorstep is a prime example of what happens if the energy transition is focused only on stopping new oil and gas projects."

But it was during the ensuing panel discussion that Gallagher, a former APPEA chair, made clear how he was thinking about the future. When asked whether he was worried about the outcome from the 2022 federal election, Gallagher answered with a verbal shrug.

"Not really," he said. "I think my request is that there be no big knee jerk factors, that there's no big Biden-type policy announcement on day one, in closing things down, because I think that'd be very disruptive."

A RISING SHIT TIDE

I WAS COLLECTING MY bags from the coat-check after the final panel when I overheard them: two tall, white men in blue suits talking about climate change. They were in the corporate hierarchy of one firm or another, and the second was getting really worked up talking about the idea of net zero by 2050.

"It's bullshit," he said. "It's all bullshit."

The gist was that the world was sending contradictory signals: at the same time it was talking about the need to end fossil fuel production, it was telling oil and gas companies to produce more. For all the guff about how the industry "understands one-hundred percent our obligations to decarbonise", they had zeroed in on this tension and interpreted it to justify their continued existence.

How could they not? I had just spent three days steeping in the company of men like these. They had devoted their lives to an industry responsible for creating an existential threat to humanity that had to end, but their salaries depended on them refusing to accept that reality. Instead they spoke in doublespeak and wrapped themselves in a comforting illusion – but when they were being completely honest, even they did not believe their own bullshit.

And yet the harm they had caused was happening in real time. The day I had flown into Brisbane the price of petrol hit $2.24 a litre and the friend who picked me up from the airport explained how "technically" the city had flooded four times in as many months.

She and her partner lived in Oxley, the region that elected Pauline Hanson, a climate change denier, to represent them in Canberra in 1996. On the drive back to the Queenslander they rented – a raised structure built to allow floodwaters to pass harmlessly beneath – she pointed out a verdant field and apologised for the smell.

When the city floods and its stormwater system is overwhelmed, she explained, it mixes with sewage and the overflow is discharged into the lake. The residue of humanity bakes there in the Queensland sun as it evaporates, leaving an aroma to waft across the neighbourhood for weeks.

The shit lake was not the only subtle reminder of the way climate change is already beginning to erode the habitability of our cities. The other was the mould.

As the rain fell amid the heat, Brisbane turned into a sauna with successive days of 100 percent humidity. Every surface seemed to sweat, creating the perfect conditions for thick sheets of black mould to appear overnight. The World Health Organisation says there is no safe level of exposure to black mould but bleaching it off walls and surfaces did no good. In 24 hours, it would be back.

It's been said that the lived experience of climate change is watching terrible things happen to other people on your phone until it inevitably happens to you. This is true, but in between those big, dramatic moments is the day-to-day accumulation of subtle inconveniences which eventually add up to make a place unlivable.

Not even the oil and gas industry themselves could escape this reality. The Australian Oilfield Golf Tournament had been scheduled for the Friday but would end up cancelled owing to the torrential rain.

The competition's chair, Kylie Carrie, lead analyst with Shell subsidiary QGC, explained with "great regret," in a note announcing the cancellation, how the torrential rains which had temporarily wiped Lismore from the map had also flooded the Brookwater Golf and Country Club forcing it "closed for a week and still not drained".

"As most are aware there has been a major weather event over the last week in the greater Brisbane area, significant amounts of rain," Carre said. "Brookwater have advised that they will no longer be able to accommodate the AOGT for 2022."

It was a disappointment for the executives who had been hanging out for a morning on the green but it was hard to imagine they would find much sympathy. For the principal actors responsible for driving climate change it was just the cost of doing business and, perhaps, a sign of things to come – for there can be no golf on a dead planet.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY **Michelle Grace Hunder**

Reviews

Music

MAGGIE ROGERS' NEW FREEDOM

A pop-music prodigy delivers her complicated second album

BY JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

Maggie Rogers
Surrender
CAPITOL
★★★½☆

THE STARK cover of Maggie Rogers' second album makes a statement: Gone are the twilight hues and soft focus of her 2019 debut, *Heard It in a Past Life*, and their suggestion of a young artist working her way through her own thrilling ascendance. That album capped off a several-year process of Rogers' coronation as the Next Big Thing, earning her arena slots opening for Kacey Musgraves and a Best New Artist Grammy nomination. The zoomed-in black-and-white photo on the cover of *Surrender* lets us know that her swift coronation has now led to a more complicated reality. It also suggests an artist who's in it for the long haul: *"You tell me you want* ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Jody Hewgill

MAGGIE ROGERS

everything, you want it fast," Rogers sings on "Anywhere With You," the record's cathartic centrepiece. The narrator and their partner are desperate for a quick fix, to flee their problems and escape town, go joyriding anywhere, even I-95. But Rogers has a response: *"All I ever wanted is to make something fucking last."*

Rogers' debut was a showcase for her eclectic, prodigious ambition; she's someone who can command banjo-strummed roots music, streaming-friendly synth-pop, and anthemic arena rock. *Surrender* feels less hungry to impress. It seems to reflect what the 28-year-old singer-songwriter is most interested in at this very moment, which appears to be a blend of Nineties alt-rock and turn-of-the-century shopping-mall pop. A few of the endless array of touchstones: "Criminal"-era Fiona Apple; iPod-era U2; early-2000s Pink; and most of all, Alanis Morissette, whose *Jagged Little Pill* seems like a primary reference point.

Rogers (a former aspiring music critic and recent divinity-school graduate) self-consciously dabbles in several tropes that are often native to second albums by hyped artists: restlessness with semi-stardom ("Honey"); nostalgia for a carefree adolescence ("Shatter"); anxiety about no longer feeling grounded ("Symphony"); a desire to escape responsibility ("Horses"). The insistence that she's a career artist here to stay might be the most convincing.

It's no surprise that on an album about seeking escape, Rogers has turned toward the sounds and comforts of her youth. On "Be Cool," she daydreams about spending just one night listening to Britney Spears with old pals. On the very next song, "Shatter," she conjures *Fearless*-era Taylor Swift: *"We're going back/To being 16, flying like you'll never collapse."* Then there's "Begging for Rain," on which Rogers channels Bonnie Raitt's version of John Prine's classic song "Angel From Montgomery": *"You work all day to find religion/And end up standing in your kitchen."*

Rogers sounds a bit fed up and even more tired, as she "keep[s] waiting" on a thunderstorm to finally provide some respite. But if Maggie Rogers tells us anything on *Surrender*, it's that she's in no rush to get wherever her talent takes her. ®

COUNTRY'S GROWN-UP BRO

Luke Combs nudges Nashville clichés in the right direction on his third album BY MAURA K. JOHNSTON

Luke Combs
Growin' Up
Sony Nashville
★★★½☆

LUKE COMBS wants you to know one thing: He's a regular guy. He might be playing songs that immediately become playlist staples, but those ballads and rockers are, he maintains, the same ones he'd be playing if he were only outfitted with, as he croons on the opening track of his third album, *Growin' Up*, "tips in a jar, my guitar, and an old barstool." The 32-year-old North Carolinian, reigning Country Music Entertainer of the Year, stadium headliner, and holder of multiple platinum records, is trying hard to not be starstruck by his own success. Mostly, it works.

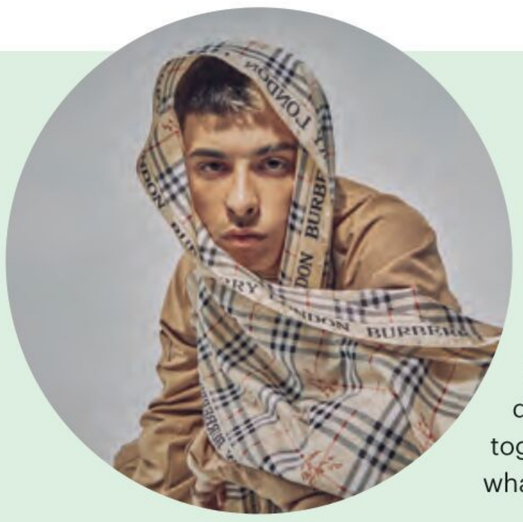
While similar claims of humility from megastars can come off as a bit far-fetched, the dozen songs on *Growin' Up* bear out the just-from-the-heart assertions that appear on the slow-burning "Doin' This." Combs adds just enough modern-day brawn to Nashville songwriting ideals to make the LP an enjoyable, and at times moving, spin through his world of small-town bars and big-hearted people.

On *Growin' Up*, these classic country topics are elevated by Combs' vocals. His robust, rough-edged tenor adds a warmth to his nostalgia-drenched songs, like the road-not-taken chronicle "Used to Wish I Was," as well as the references to the songs and artists he loves, like Garth Brooks and George Jones.

"Any Given Friday Night," which in lesser hands would be a run-of-the-mill bro-country ode to small-town weekend bacchanalia, gets its power from Combs' obvious affection for those who pregame in DQ parking lots in "pick a map dot town[s]," as well as grime-caked guitars that hint at the messiness awaiting those revellers in the later hours. Those riffs are part of *Growin' Up's* sonic maturity; its spacious production, helmed by Combs alongside co-producers Chip Matthews and Jonathan Singleton, allows guitar licks and thumping bass lines to tug songs in sometimes surprising directions.

"The Kind of Love We Make," a gently urgent come-on to a woman who's been too stressed-out to let loose in the bedroom, is a country revamp of mid tempo Nineties alt-adult cuts like Semisonic's "Secret Smile"; the rave-up "Ain't Far From It" depicts one of the dates that could eventually lead to those moments of committed bliss, with Combs' flirtations egged on by honky-tonk pianos and saucy licks.

Combs isn't reinventing Nashville's four-wheel clichés on *Growin' Up*; he's merely giving it a fresh coat of wax and removing the more ostentatious add-ons. But his detail-rich songs make *Growin' Up* a big-time country album with a tip-jar-worthy intimacy. ®



BREAKING

Trueno's Brave New Old-School Rap

ARGENTINE RAPPER Trueno is just 20, but he's already realising his potential as one of South American hip-hop's most compelling new voices. Songs like "Hoop Hoop" and "Fuck el Police," from his excellent second album, *Bien o Mal*, are steeped in old-school American hip-hop. Splitting the thirteen tracks between two sides, "The Bad" and "The Good," Trueno raps about dictatorships, economic hardships, crime, and inequality, while urging people to rise and stand together. He says he wanted to turn "the idea of protesting into a celebration," and that's exactly what he does. The result is one of the year's sharpest breakout releases. **JULYSSA LOPEZ**

FROM TOP: JEREMY COWART; IMAGINE IT MEDIA

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor RATINGS ARE SUPERVISED BY THE EDITORS OF ROLLING STONE.

Quick Hits

Seven new albums you need to know about now

Sampa The Great

As Above, So Below

(Loma Vista)

Building on the momentum of 2019's phenomenal *The Return*, Sampa The Great's latest work presents the multinational artist's best work to date. True to its name, the record reaches new heights in production and songwriting while delving deeper than ever before into themes of Sampa's memories of her homeland, womanhood, and Africa's relationship to the world. The lyricism is incisive and engaging, the flows are resolute, and the beats are world-class. **SAM BOWMER**

★★★★½

Stella Donnelly

Flood

(IND)

It's been three years since Donnelly's stunning debut, *Beware of the Dogs*, but the absence has only sharpened her sound and introspective songwriting. The jangling indie-pop gems we've come to expect remain, but there are intriguing new layers elsewhere: co-produced by Methyl Ethel's Jake Webb, the luminous melancholy of his band is felt throughout *Flood*. An open vulnerability extends from several tracks ("Restricted Account" and "Underwater") showcasing Donnelly's raw but tender ability on the piano — not her first instrument of choice. With its thoughtful mixture of sonic experimentation and classic touches, *Flood* achieves exactly what a sophomore album should. **CONOR LOCHRIE**

★★★★☆

Meg Mac

Matter of Time

(EMI Music)

It took what she herself has called a "meltdown", the scrapping of an entire album two weeks before the lead single's release, a restructure of her core team, and a move to a remote NSW village to create her most compelling body of work yet. Meg Mac has always been deliberate with her industry moves and music works, but this third album is a grand statement. From opener "Is It Worth Being Sad", her pop-soul epiphany, to "Don't You Cry," the sermon to her former self, to album highlight "Something In The Water", with gospel hints that will have you kneeling at the altar of Meg Mac's second coming, *Matter of Time* is raw, unbridled and more assertive than any of her past works. **POPPY REID**

★★★★☆

The Chats

Get Fucked

(IND)

They may have swapped one Josh for another, but it's more of the same from The Chats on sophomore album *Get Fucked*. New guitarist Josh Hardy has fitted seamlessly; the trio's raucous racket sounds tighter and more purposeful. The Chats essentially sum up their proudly unvarnished approach to punk rock best on the first song "6 LTR GTR": *"Don't need a big flash fancy car / Just need a 6 litre GTR."* **CONOR LOCHRIE**

★★★½☆

Julia Jacklin

Pre Pleasure

(LIB)

Julia Jacklin doesn't need to shout from the rooftops. The Melbourne-based singer and songwriter has a slow burn talent with a timeless quality, and it's captured the attention of music fans and critics around the globe. With *Pre Pleasure*, her third album, Jacklin should make more friends. Completed in Montreal with co-producer Marcus Paquin, off the back of a gruelling world tour, P*re Pleasure* is warm and contemplative, its alt-country leanings at times meditative. **LARS BRANDLE**

★★★★☆

Parkway Drive

Darker Still

(Cooking Vinyl Aus)

The stakes have never been higher for metalcore behemoths Parkway Drive. After twenty years together, and now seven albums in, the chart-topping global exports from Byron Bay had a lot to prove — but they've always been full of surprises. From risk-taking theatrics in "The Greatest Fear" and "If A God Can Bleed", to groove metal leanings ("Imperial Heretic") and classic Nineties guitar tones ("Glitch", "Soul Bleach"), *Darker Still* is damn near perfect. **POPPY REID**

★★★★½

Last Dinosaurs

From Mexico With Love

(IND)

From Mexico With Love can act as background chatter — in the best possible way. The new album from Last Dinosaurs blends into the background of your thoughts, but then reaches in and takes hold without you even noticing. And with track titles like "Auto-Sabotage", "Note To Self" and "Can't Afford Psychoanalysis", it's some deep — but worthwhile — conversations you'll be having with yourself. **VIVIENNE KELLY**

★★★☆☆

JUILA JACKLIN: NICK MCKK, STELLA DONNELLY: EMMA DAISY, LAST DINOSAURS: SUPPLIED

OCEAN ALLEY

BY JAMES DI FABRIZIO

OCEAN ALLEY

Low Altitude Living

(IND)

★★★½☆

OCEAN ALLEY makes good on their promise for a compelling – if at times formulaic – album. There are moments where the band expand their sound, dipping into warbles of toasty psychedelia and cinematic production. Yet the chaos remains controlled, sounding more Byron-lite than transformative trip. *Low Altitude Living* was created through different means to Ocean Alley's previous work. Typically, the group would get together for free-flowing jams and wrangle these looser sessions into completed tracks. The new record, however, is a time capsule of the pandemic, with ideas demoed and finessed digitally first. While this imbues the album with a welcome, broader sonic palette, the band's infectious chemistry doesn't always translate. In saying that, Baden Donegal has never sounded better – grounding himself as a magnetic frontman who delivers a soaring vocal performance of heady croons. Ultimately, this album will push Ocean Alley further towards major-global-band status. ®

ISABELLA MANFREDI

BY VIVIENNE KELLY

ISABELLA MANFREDI

Izzi

(ISL/UMA)

★★★★☆

THIS IS A truly joyful album for a project which is so steeped in themes of power, independence and taking control. Isabella Manfredi's *izzi* is her debut effort as a solo artist after her time with indie pop/rock outfit The Preatures. The opening track "Seasons Change" sets the tone and sends the message: It's a new era with a new sound for Manfredi – one she says is more authentic, all-encompassing and representative of her as an artist. Manfredi says she wants people to feel wrapped in her music as the "kaleidoscopic", "technicolour" and "colourful" sound unfolds across *izzi's* ten tracks. The album also sets the steep task of attempting to sound like Bruce Springsteen if he was in an all-girl group in the early 2000s. Somehow, it does all of these things and more, marking Manfredi's return to storytelling. ®

MEL PARSONS

BY JAKE CHALLENOR

BY NAME and nature, *Slow Burn*, the new album from alt-folk storyteller Mel Parsons, is pure platonic poison. It's the Sunday afternoon long-play you pop on while making a pot of tea, and before you know it, you're hooked on her every melodic and oftentimes melancholic introspections. Each listen divulges more than the last, especially on singles "Going Under" and "Already Gone". ®

Mel Parsons

Slow Burn

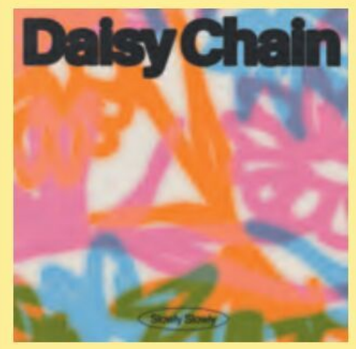
(IND)

★★★★☆

SLOWLY SLOWLY

BY JAKE CHALLENOR

TIME IS of the essence when you're chasing the future. Ten years ago Slowly Slowly frontman Ben Stewart wrote a poisonous and provocative love song, a really good one that he left for dust for reasons unknown – until now at least. A decade later "Moving Trains" offers a rare and resonant glimpse into Stewart's decade-old adolesent bravado *("I bet that you'd gamble on me / If you heard the frequency I'm on / It sounds like death threats on your wedding day / Well wishes on your funeral cake")*. Ouch! The three-minute lovers' quarrel, which sits alongside standouts "Forget You", "Nothing On", "Hold My Breath" and "Papier-Mache" on the four-piece's new album *Daisy Chain*, adds the anthemic vocals of Chris Carrabba of Dashboard Confessional fame on "Moving Trains". Brash lyrics and uplifting production lend it perfectly to the closing credits on the next Nineties-inspired hit Hollywood rom-com. The twelve track follow-up to last year's *Race Car Blues Chapter Two* – during which the band shocked fans when they announced a mid-tour hiatus due to "health challenges" affronting Stewart – heralds a neoteric new direction for Melbourne indie punk rockers Patrick Murphy, Albert Doan, Alex Quayle, and Stewart. Self-produced by Stewart and mixed by Jonathan Gilmore (Wolf Alice, The 1975), *Daisy Chain* is littered with revealing secrets *("I felt I was a bystander, numb from the cancer")*, suggestive scandals *("Call the cops, somebody stop me")* and minor mishaps *("I got business, I'm gonna sink this")*. Time heals all wounds, as the saying goes. *Daisy Chain* is Stewart's frank attempt to make sense of his more complex and darker days in pursuit of a lifetime of happier hours. Therapy has never sounded so inviting. ®



Slowly Slowly

Daily Chain

(UNFD)

★★★★☆

OCEAN ALLEY: KANE LEHANNEUR, ISABELLA MANFREDI: SUPPLIED, MEL PARSONS: SABIN HOLLOWAY, SLOWLY SLOWLY: KANE HIBBERD

ESSAY

Is Netflix Still Worth a Damn?

The streaming giant used to be a viewer's best friend. Now, it seems content to give us the finger

BY ALAN SEPINWALL

IF NETFLIX WASN'T the only streaming video service of the 2010s, it often felt as if it was. It had a remarkable library of classic TV shows that at one point included *The Office, Friends,* and *Lost,* to name a few. Beginning in 2013 with *House of Cards* and *Orange Is the New Black,* and continuing through *Daredevil, Stranger Things,* and more, it had a wave of original series that viewers couldn't stop talking about. And its method of releasing every episode of a new season at once transformed the very way we consumed and talked about television. While other streamers like Hulu and Amazon Prime Video struggled to keep up, Netflix just kept spending, apparently determined to destroy as much of the competition as possible while convincing viewers they would never need another source for TV and movies.

The plan worked – sort of. The volume of Netflix's output encouraged millions of consumers to cut the cable cord and stick with a handful of streamers, burning traditional broadcast and cable ratings almost down to ash. But where Netflix should feel triumphant as the tenth anniversary of the Cards premiere approaches next year, instead it's playing defence. Sure, its subscriber base still vastly outnumbers any of its competitors, but it's a tech company whose business model is predicated on constant growth, and that growth of late has slowed to a crawl. In some markets, it's even gone down, which has sent the value of Netflix's stock plummeting. (The price dropped thirty-five percent on one day alone in mid-April.) The service that once prided itself on providing a clean, ad-free alternative to traditional television is now planning a lower-priced, ad-supported subscription tier later this year to stop the bleeding.

How did a company that once wiped Blockbuster off the map with its maverick ingenuity become another potential business-school cautionary tale? It's the shows, stupid.

While Netflix had a huge head start on the competition, the rest of the industry was not blind to what was happening throughout the 2010s. Every other conglomerate quickly understood both that streaming was the future and that they had to beef up their own digital platforms right away. As Netflix's library deals lapsed, those titles went back home: *Friends* to HBO Max, *The Office* to Peacock, and so on.

And if Netflix's competitors couldn't compete in quantity of original programming, they could in quality. Netflix has made a few masterpieces over the past decade – see our list at right – but for the most part, its executives seemed to aim for shows that were just good enough. The suits trusted that the superior calibre of their user interface, the power of their recommendation algorithm, and a heavy emphasis on serialisation and cliffhangers would make people want to keep watching more and more Netflix, no matter what.

But that approach has proved to be unsustainable now that customers have so many other options. Netflix finally won a couple of major Emmys last year, for *The Crown* and

ILLUSTRATION BY **Matt Harrison Clough**

The Queen's Gambit, and still manages the odd breakout hit, like *Bridgerton* or *Squid Game*. More often than not, though, the shows people are talking about these days come from non-Netflix sources, like *The Mandalorian* on Disney+, *Ted Lasso* on Apple TV+, or *The Flight Attendant* on HBO Max.

Not coincidentally, all of those shows are either released on a traditional one-episode-per-week schedule or some kind of hybrid model that's still well short of Netflix's binge-release approach. Where binges once felt exciting, there's now so much television that it can feel like homework to have an entire season dumped on you on a Friday. The binge model has also encouraged the worst instincts in many Netflix creators, who too often refer to their shows as "a ten-hour movie." This is meant to sound prestigious, but it mostly turns a season into an amorphous bag of plot with an inescapable sense that things have been dragging on for much too long.

Netflix's early image was as a friend to the viewer, rescuing shows cancelled by other networks. It seemed to have an unspoken agreement with audiences that series would be allowed to run as long as creators wanted – or, at least, that creators would be given ample warning if they had to write a finale. Those days are long gone. Now, the Netflix algorithm has determined that all but the most popular shows are better off ending within two to three seasons, because viewers would rather have constantly new viewing options than keep watching their favourites for years on end. And in many cases, shows like the charming women's pro-wrestling dramedy *GLOW* have been abruptly cancelled without any kind of storytelling closure for their audiences.

A big part of the problem is that so many Netflix originals lately seem to have been developed solely to satisfy the "if you liked that, you'll enjoy this" aspect of the algorithm, and come across as pale imitations of the real thing. *Ozark* clearly scratched an itch for viewers who missed *Breaking Bad*, *Justified*, and the like, but even its fans seemed more excited for the type of show it was than for *Ozark* itself.

All along, there's been a complacent, and at times arrogant, attitude at Netflix that 'its way is the only way'; its algorithm is smarter than the most astute TV veterans, and anyone suggesting otherwise is just living in the past. That same posture has been palpable in recent Netflix PR disasters like its steadfast defence of Dave Chappelle's anti-trans rhetoric in his Netflix specials, and in the company's aggressive, but so far largely unsuccessful, pursuit of Academy Awards for its movie division.

For all the talk over the years by Netflix execs about the ways they are transforming the television industry, the core idea remains the same as it was in the days of *I Love Lucy:* Make shows that people really want to watch. With its tentacles reaching in so many directions, Netflix hasn't been doing enough of that for quite a while. Whether it can find its way back to the future remains to be seen.

SEXPERTS Mackey and Butterfield share carnal knowledge.

THE BEST OF NETFLIX

When the streamer's shows are good, they're very good

20. Sex Education

2019-PRESENT

YA has been a fruitful category for Netflix, particularly this rollicking Britcom. Shy teenager Otis (Asa Butterfield) has been miserable growing up with a single mom who's an outspoken sex therapist (Gillian Anderson). But when the kids at his school start having relationship difficulties, Otis, his queer best friend Eric (Ncuti Gatwa, in a star-making performance), and Otis' crush Maeve (Emma Mackey) start up a bootleg sex clinic to help their classmates get satisfaction. A comedy as sweet as it is silly, it explores a wide range of sexual and romantic relationships.

19. The Haunting of Hill House 2018

Horror filmmaker Mike Flanagan has graced Netflix with an unofficial franchise featuring many of the same actors (see also *The Haunting of Bly Manor and Midnight Mass),* starting with this crackling adaptation of the Shirley Jackson novel about a family that can't escape the history of the haunted house where they lived (and some of them died). Even at a time when it feels obligatory for a prestige drama to do long, continuous shots, the Hill House episode presented that way was a marvel.

18. The Baby-Sitters Club

2020-2021

Though adaptations of famous IP are all the rage right now, Netflix somehow couldn't find a big enough audience for this warm-hearted take on Ann M. Martin's beloved book series about a group of middle-school girls who start up their own babysitting business. But those who did watch found a lot to cherish in the way the show modernised aspects of the novels — in one episode, the shy Mary Anne (Malia Baker) stands up to ER doctors who keep misgendering her latest charge — while staying true to their coming-of-age heart.

17. Stranger Things

2016-Present

Like Steven Spielberg's Jaws sent the movie business on a never-ending hunt for blockbusters, the success of *Stranger Things* — itself an homage to the Eighties works of Spielberg and Stephen King — transformed Netflix from a company happy with boutique hits and critical acclaim into one that wanted its shows to attract huge audiences. If the series has begun to feel bloated in its later seasons (and if the kids look old enough to run for Congress), it's still terrific popcorn entertainment that's made at least one great new star in Millie Bobby Brown as the telekinetic Eleven.

16. Lady Dynamite

2016-2017

In its earlier years, Netflix built a large stable of shows whose individual audiences may not have been huge, but were designed to be some viewers' all-time favourites. Perhaps no series symbolised this creative ethos more than *Lady Dynamite*. Inspired by star Maria Bamford's struggles with bipolar disorder, it was weird, sad, and surreal as it bounced through multiple eras of her life, including the future.

15. The Crown 2016-PRESENT

The "ten-hour movie" storytelling model has been bad for most Netflix dramas. One exception: Peter Morgan's old-school (in every sense) docudrama about Queen Elizabeth (played so far by Claire Foy and Olivia Colman, with Imelda Staunton set for the final seasons). The show wisely goes with a traditional crisis-of-the-week format, so that each episode has its own conflicts, even as they feed into fascinating larger questions about how the royals have to sublimate their own desires in service to an ideal they were born into.

14. Dear White People

2017-2021

Not every movie lends itself well to being adapted for television. The translations that work tend to involve ideas where there was more to say than could fit into a feature-length film. Case in point: Justin Simien's expansion of his sharp 2014 film about Black students at a predominantly white Ivy League school. The show had four seasons' worth of room to explore the perspectives of what felt like everyone on campus,

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: SAM TAYLOR/NETFLIX; STEVE DIETL/NETFLIX; NETFLIX, 2; KAILEY SCHWERMAN/NETFLIX; BETH DUBBER/NETFLIX; LARA SOLANKI/NETFLIX

and to do bold experiments like turning much of the final season into a musical.

13. Squid Game

2021-PRESENT

Netflix has been way out ahead in terms of acquiring or developing programming for its international markets *(Elite, Money Heist, Lupin)*. The best of these series is *Squid Game*, a riveting dystopian thriller out of Korea about financially desperate people who agree to compete in a deadly, winner-takes-all competition inspired by schoolyard games like Red Light, Green Light. A triumph of both social satire and production design, it became a rare word-of-mouth phenomenon.

12. When They See Us

2019

It was an infamous story made even more harrowing when it became clear the cops and the media had gotten it so wrong: A woman was brutally raped in Central Park, and five young men of colour were convicted, only to be exonerated years later, when the real attacker confessed. Ava DuVernay's dramatisation of the story packs a wallop throughout, but especially in the sequences depicting what Korey Wise (Emmy winner Jharrel Jerome) endured as the only member of the Central Park Five sentenced as an adult.

11. Mindhunter

2017-2019

David Fincher executive-produced *House of Cards*, but his best contribution to Netflix was his return to the serial-killer territory of *Se7en* and *Zodiac*. This time, he approached the genre from a different direction, with a drama about the FBI agents (played by Jonathan Groff and Holt McCallanny), and psychiatrist (Anna Torv), who created the science of criminal profiling. The bulk of the show is just the agents talking with incarcerated monsters — making *Mindhunter* the odd thriller that's all talk and little action, and much more interesting for it.

10. Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt 2015-2019

We have to blur the lines to call Kimmy a Netflix original, since the first season was produced to air on NBC, before network executives there panicked that the show — about a young woman (Ellie Kemper) rescued from years trapped in a doomsday cult's underground bunker — would be too weird or sad to work for them. But Tina Fey and Robert Carlock's creation had a healthy and frequently hilarious four-season run when it surely would have died within a few weeks on NBC. A win-win.

9. One Day at a Time

2017-2019

Even beyond Kimmy Schmidt, Netflix built an early reputation as a viewer-friendly place by rescuing cancelled shows from broadcast and cable networks. Eventually, the roles reversed, and we had a situation where this smart, funny, and poignant Norman Lear revival — starring Justina Machado as a Cuban American single mum raising teen kids with the help of her mother, Lydia (Rita Moreno), and dealing with hot-button issues like immigration, sexuality, and PTSD — was cancelled by Netflix and then revived for a fourth season by cable channel Pop.

8. Unbelievable 2019

Netflix and actress Merritt Wever have been a strong team over the years. She won an Emmy for her gun-slinging role in 2017's Godless, stole scenes in *Marriage Story,* and was phenomenal here as an empathetic cop (alongside Toni Collette) on the trail of a serial rapist. TV is inundated with mediocre true-crime dramatisations, but *Unbelievable* — which featured a fantastic Kaitlyn Dever as a victim of the rapist who was somehow charged with lying to police about it — is one great enough to live up to its title.

7. Master of None

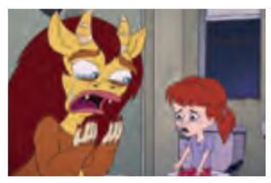
2015-PRESENT

Aziz Ansari's *Master of None* was among the best of the wave of auteur-driven TV in the 2010s. He wrote, directed, and starred in the show's ambitious and lovely early seasons, which mixed stories of his alter ego, Dev, who was looking for love, with tales of the people in Dev's life: his immigrant father's journey to America, his friend Denise (Lena Waithe) gradually coming out to her family, even a digression about New York cabbies. After a long break, it returned last year with a *Scenes From a Marriage*-inspired story about Denise, which was less interesting, even as it suggested that Ansari and Waithe had not run out of ambition.

6. I Think You Should Leave With Tim Robinson

2019-PRESENT

Each season of Tim Robinson's sketch-comedy delight is six episodes of less than 20 minutes apiece. Yet within that efficient packaging exist indelible, explosive comedy bits, many of them about people who take some dumb belief and refuse to let go of it until everyone around them is deeply uncomfortable. Bonus points for the hot-dog car sketch ("We're all trying to find the guy who did this!") becoming the single most useful meme of the past four years.



5. Big Mouth 2017-PRESENT

An animated show about middle schoolers that probably shouldn't be watched by middle schoolers, *Big Mouth* focuses on the rampaging horniness of characters like Nick (co-creator Nick Kroll), Andrew (John Mulaney), Jessi (Jessi Klein), and the pillow-molesting Jay (Jason Mantzoukas). And that's even before we get to all the filthy fantasies put into the kids' heads by hormone monsters like Connie (Maya Rudolph). Yet as graphic as the series gets, it has a fundamental empathy for kids going through one of the most uncomfortable stages of life.

4. American Vandal

2017-2018

Speaking of scatological adolescent ridiculousness, consider this note-perfect spoof of true-crime podcasts and docuseries in which a pair of high school filmmakers investigate two mysteries: Who defaced twenty-seven cars in the faculty parking lot with drawings of penises, and who contaminated the cafeteria lemonade to make their classmates lose control of their bowels? As satire alone, it was wonderful. But beneath all the dick and poop jokes was an insightful and poignant look at the kids caught up in all this gross-out behaviour.

3. Russian Doll

2019-PRESENT

We're finally entering the realm of Capital-G Greatness. Natasha Lyonne graduated from the next show on this list to her own co-creation: a high-concept series that bent genre as easily as it bent the laws of physics. In the flawless first season, Lyonne's irrepressible Nadia was cursed to die and be reborn over and over again on her thity-sixth birthday. In the messier but still delightful second season, she began quantum leaping into the young lives of her mother and grandmother. *Russian Doll* is brimming with ideas and energy in a way few recent series (on Netflix or otherwise) can equal.

2. Orange Is the New Black 2013-2019

House of Cards was the kind of middle-aged-male antihero drama that television had seen plenty of before. *Orange,* a dramedy set at a federal women's prison with an enormous cast crossing boundaries of race, sexuality, gender, and more, felt brand-new, and like a sign that the streaming era would have lots of room for TV to keep evolving. That's not quite what happened, and *Orange* was more creatively uneven than many shows on this list. But its best moments were remarkable and symbolise a road the streamer hasn't taken nearly as often as it could.

1. BoJack Horseman

2014-2020

Yes, the one indisputable Netflix masterpiece is an animated dramedy about a depressed horse (Will Arnett) who once starred in a bad Nineties family sitcom and now contents himself with abusing both drugs and the trust of anyone who cares about him. *BoJack* was a parody of modern dramas about middle-aged male antiheroes who get away with everything. But it was also a supreme example of the form, as laugh-out-loud ridiculous and as soul-crushingly sad a show as has been produced during the streaming era. ®

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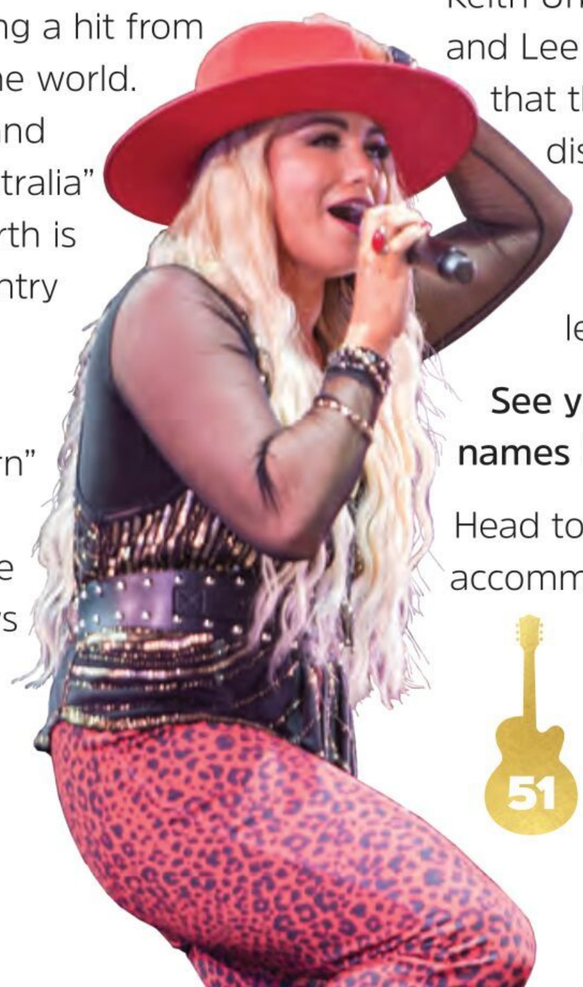

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Christine McVie

The songwriter on navigating the 'storm' of Fleetwood Mac

You're releasing a new collection of your solo recordings, but you've made only three solo albums during the past fifty years. Why is that?
Well, I've never felt I was a solo artist, particularly. I've always liked to be part of a group... I also felt very uneasy about doing a solo tour for the material. And with this new compilation, I just went for favourite songs of mine and had them redone with extra instrumentation.

'Songbird,' McVie's first compilation of her solo work, is out now.

What music still moves you the most?
I'm a big fan of Steely Dan; the Beach Boys; Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young. I like quite a broad range of people, and my favourite... the Beatles, of course. Some of their songs move me to tears.

How do you relax these days?
I watch a lot of TV. Really, that's about it. I don't really write songs to relax. When I feel a bit of pressure coming on, I'll get to the piano and see what I can come up with.

What's the best advice you ever received?
Not to lie. To be honest. That came from my parents. I can't imagine better advice coming from one's parents. I try to stick by that rule and to be as good a person as I can.

What's the worst part of success?
Being noticed if you don't want to be noticed. I'm not one of these people that's an extrovert... But one shouldn't mind, because after all, they're paying you a terrific compliment.

If you could travel back in time to 1976, what advice would you give yourself?
I think I followed my map pretty well in the course of my life... To be honest with you, I don't think I gave myself any advice. I think I just kind of got on with what I was doing and thoroughly enjoyed it. Obviously, my best beautiful days were when we were the Buckingham-Nicks Fleetwood Mac version. That was the best to me.

You were seen by many as the calm and the reasonable person in the eye of the hurricane that was Fleetwood Mac.
That is apparently true, but I didn't realise that at the time. Yes, I was supposedly like the Mother Teresa who would hang out with everybody or just try and [keep] everything nice and cool and relaxed. But they were great people; they were great friends.

What sort of toll did that take on you emotionally, to be that Mother Teresa figure?
I don't think I thought about it that much. I enjoyed the storm... Even though I am quite a peaceful person, I did enjoy that storm. Although it's said that we fought a lot, we actually did spend a lot of our time laughing. So, that must have been forgotten. Great sense of humour.

People spent so much time talking about the Lindsey-Stevie dynamic that they overlooked that you were in the band for nearly five decades with your ex-husband, John McVie. What's that relationship like?
Well, we used to fight occasionally, but not that often. I think we sorted our differences out by then, and we actually got on really well...
It was never as melodramatic as Stevie and Lindsey. And right now, we don't live in the same hemisphere. He lives in L.A.; I live in London. But we occasionally write to each other or phone each other... He's been suffering with a few health problems, but he's OK. So we talk a fair bit. He's a good man, John.

You took a fifteen-year break from the band in the early 2000s. How did you grow as a person in that time?
I just enjoyed having my dogs, living in the country, going for long walks. I just wasn't interested in playing music at that point. Then the feeling came back. Mick and I have always been in touch, and he said, "Do you ever think you'll ever come back?" I said, "I don't know." Suffice to say that I did decide to return and never regretted it.

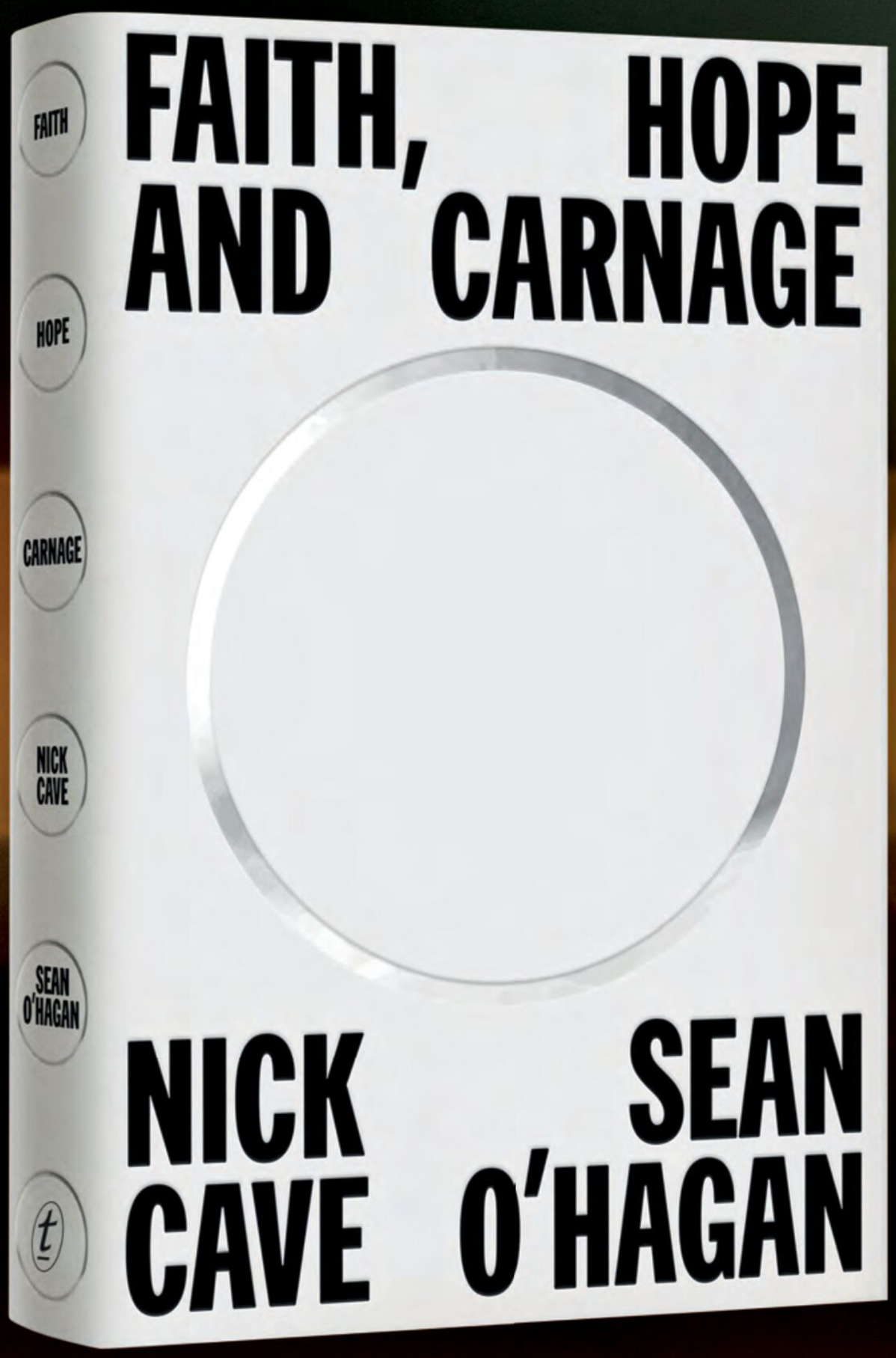
Mick has said he wants to do a farewell tour with the Rumours lineup. Do you think that's a pipe dream?
Personally, I'd love to think it could happen. But honestly, I really can't see it happening. I don't know. I've been wrong before.

Mick wants Lindsey back in the band; Lindsey wants to come back. Do you want him back?
I'd always want Lindsey back. He's the best.

ANDY GREENE

ILLUSTRATION BY **Mark Summers**

A meditation on faith, art, music, grief and much more—from cultural icon and bestselling author Nick Cave.



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